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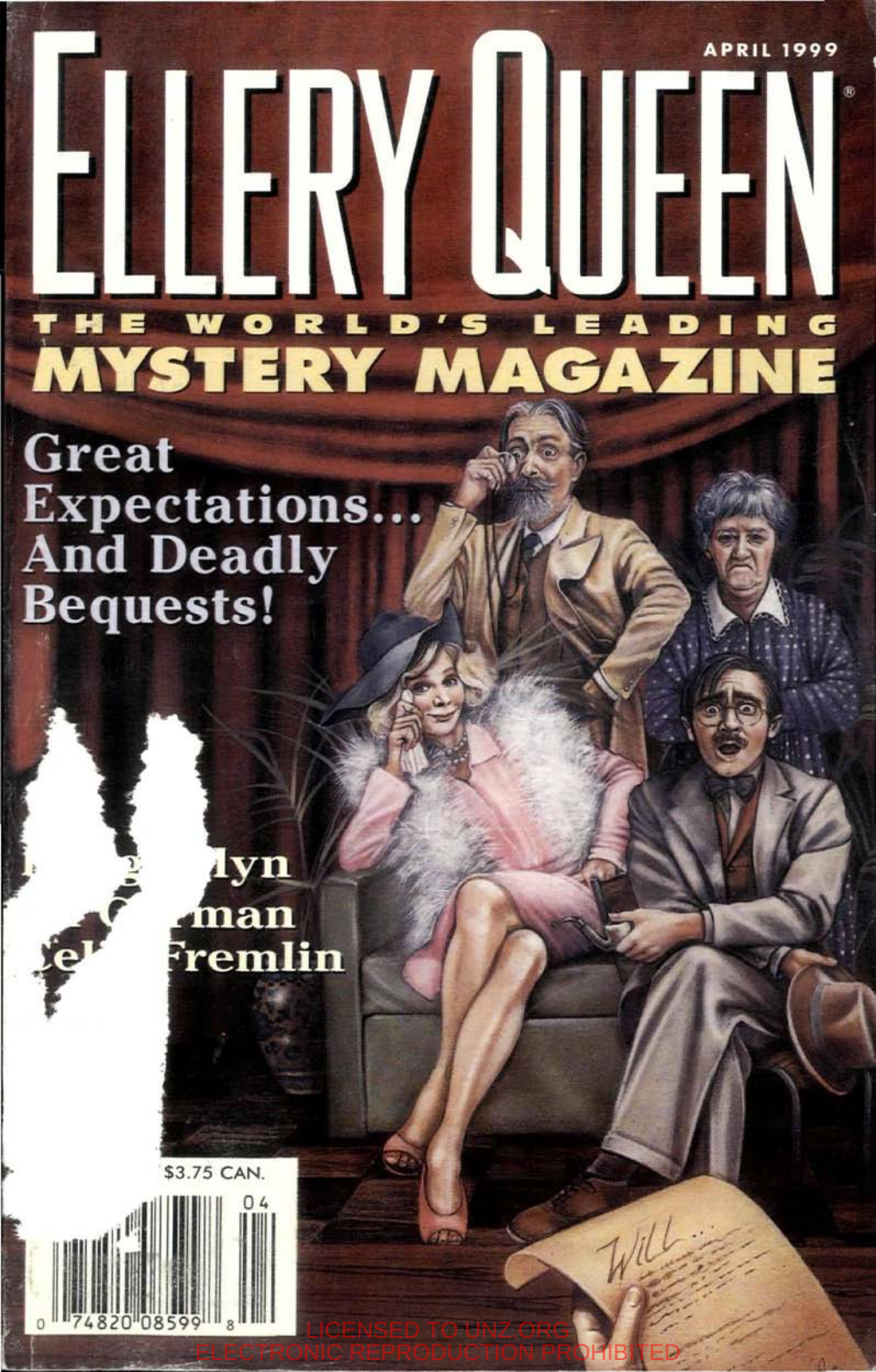

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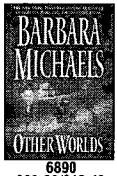

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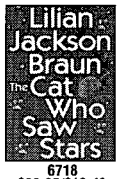

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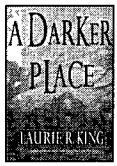

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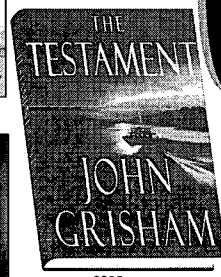

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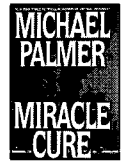

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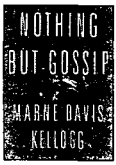

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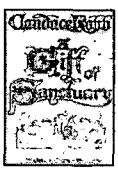

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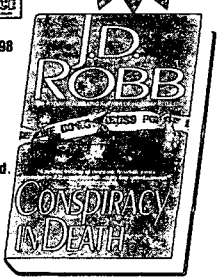

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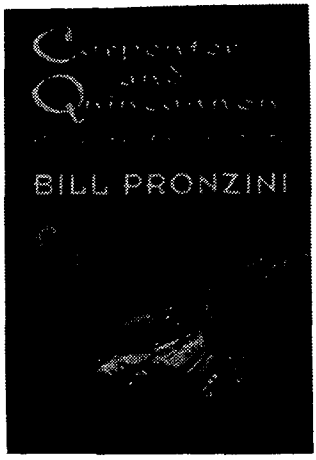

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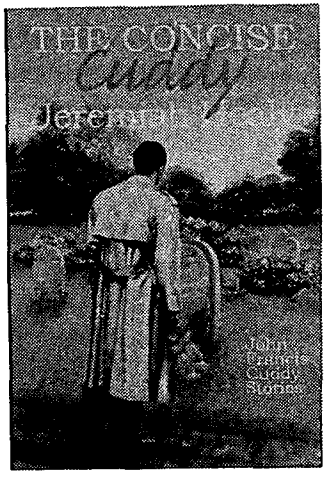

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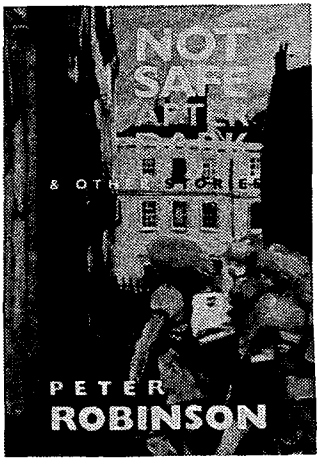

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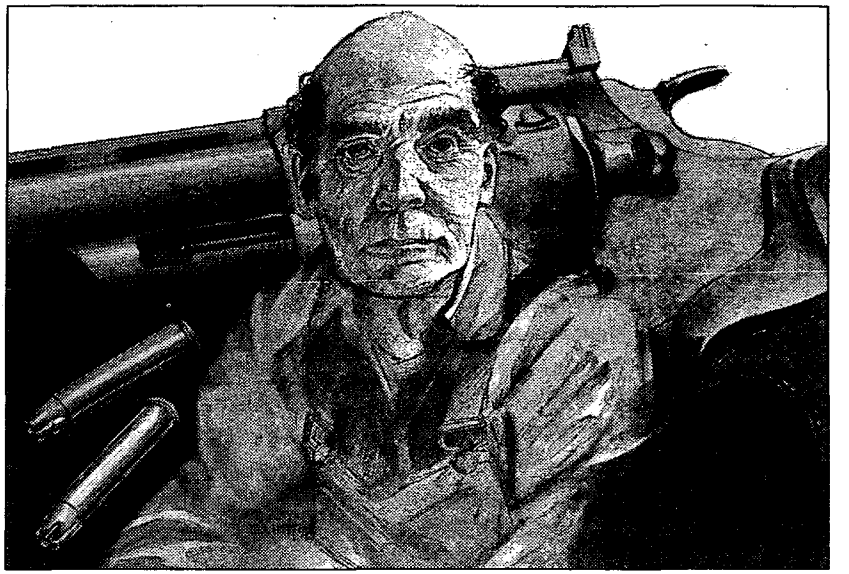

Art by Darryl Elliott

SAINT BOBBY

by Doug Allyn

She'd wished him dead and now he was. For a disjointed moment Colleen McKenzie thought she was dreaming, that the tall, well-dressed police detective standing in front of her desk was a figment. . . . He was eyeing her oddly. She swallowed, hard.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant. I've forgotten your name."

"Dylan, ma'am. John Dylan. Are you all right, Dr. McKenzie? Can I get you a glass of water or something?"

"No, I'm . . . a bit shaken, that's all. How did it happen?"

"Traffic accident. It appears he was sideswiped on Balfour Road a few miles from your home. There's a steep embankment there and your husband's Porsche went over. It apparently happened sometime last night. He was pronounced dead at the scene. I'm sorry."

Her mouth narrowed as she visibly tried to control her emotions. She looked vaguely Irish, rangy, with auburn hair, fair skin, and a spray of freckles on her throat. A cool professional, though, polished as a porcelain doll. Dylan waited, watching her, wondering if

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her composure would crack. He hoped not. Tears were tough to handle. None came, though. After a moment, she gathered herself, straightened her white lab coat, and took a deep breath.

"I don't understand," she said. "This happened last night?"

"Yes, ma'am, but the wreck wasn't discovered until this morning. Do you know where your husband was going last night?"

"No idea. Ian and I separated last year. Our divorce will be final in six weeks."

"Or would have been."

"Or—yes, I suppose so, I . . ." She hesitated, sensing something in his tone. "What was that supposed to mean? Is there something you haven't told me?"

Dylan considered the question a moment, then shrugged. "It appears the collision was intentional, Dr. McKenzie. From the skid marks it looks like the vehicle that rammed your husband's Porsche veered into it sharply, forced it over the embankment, then drove on without offering assistance. We're treating it as a possible homicide, ma'am. Do you feel up to answering a few questions?"

"What kind of questions?"

"At this point we're just trying to gather as much information as possible."

"Don't patronize me, Detective. Most of my clients here at the Institute have been ordered into treatment by the courts. As a clinical therapist, I work with cops and parole officers every day. I'm reasonably familiar with the criminal justice system. So, one professional to another, did someone ram Ian's car deliberately or not?"

"Let's just say we haven't ruled anything out yet, ma'am. May I sit?" He eased down on the metal chair facing her without waiting for an answer and they eyed each other a moment across the desk. Her eyes were an odd shade of green, ice cold at the moment.

"Would you like to have an attorney present, ma'am?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Ian and I have been on lousy terms lately but I certainly didn't wish him harm. I don't need a lawyer."

"Maybe not, but if you're familiar with the system, Dr. McKenzie,

Dr. Colleen McKenzie debuts for *EQMM* this month, but she is already listed in a TV option contract her creator, Doug Allyn, recently signed with Producers Entertainment Group. Several other Allyn characters are included in the deal, which could see favorite sleuths from several of Mr. Allyn's series combined in a single storyline. We'll keep you informed as we learn more details!

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you know that in a homicide a spouse in the middle of a divorce automatically lands on top of my list."

"Fair enough. Then let's get me off your list so we can both get back to work. What do you want to know?"

"Your whereabouts last night?"

"I was at home all evening. Alone."

"Did anyone see you? Did you talk to a neighbor, anything like that?"

"I'm afraid not. Sorry, I didn't know I was going to need an alibi or I'd have made a better job of it."

"You said your divorce was nearly final? How would you characterize your recent relationship with your husband?"

"Divorces aren't usually friendly, Sergeant. Ours definitely wasn't. It was businesslike, though. My husband is an attorney, a good one. I didn't consider our settlement equitable but fighting it would have delayed things, so I took it and ran."

"What was the reason for the divorce?"

"Infidelity. His. And . . . a car key," she added.

"Car key?"

"I was waiting for Ian in the parking lot of his club when I saw him gouge the paint of a new Pontiac. It belonged to a guy who'd just beaten him at squash. It was such a . . . damned petty thing to do that I realized our problems weren't ever going to work out. Perhaps I didn't want them to. As simple as that, and as complicated. Does that sound too cerebral, Sergeant?"

"It's not how most people would describe a divorce, but then you're a psychologist. So, the divorce may not have been friendly but it wasn't hostile either. Is that a fair statement?"

"Close enough."

"Do you stand to gain financially because of what happened?"

"I—suppose so, I haven't really thought that far ahead. Do you have a description of the car involved?"

"Not at this time, no."

"Well, I drive a secondhand blue Volvo. It's parked in my slot in the lot. You're welcome to check it over."

"Thank you, ma'am. Do you own or have access to any other vehicles? Family or friends? Anything like that?"

"My God, you're serious, aren't you?"

"We take homicide pretty seriously, yes, ma'am. And if you don't mind my saying, you're taking this quite calmly."

"It's not the first time I've heard bad news, Sergeant. I deal with grief every day."

"And it gets easier with practice?"

"Not easier, but when you've been through a tunnel a few times you know there's daylight on the other side. I've got a therapy session in five minutes. Is there anything else?"

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"Just a few quick questions. Do you know of anyone who might wish your husband harm?"

"Ian handled a lot of divorce cases. In the three years we were married he got a few phone threats and his car was vandalized once, but I'm not aware of any current problems. His office staff would know more than I do."

"Are you seeing anyone now?"

"I occasionally have dinner with friends who aren't female. I'm not in a romantic relationship, if that's what you mean."

"What about these wackos you treat, are any of them violent?"

"Wackos?"

"Well, they're seeing a shrink, so by definition they're running a quart low, right?"

A rosy glow crept above the collar of her lab coat, suffusing the freckles on her throat. But when she spoke, her voice was calm. "That was pretty good," she said evenly. "I almost bit. Actually, my clients are mostly ordinary people who are trying to improve some aspect of their lives. We can all use a little help sometimes, Sergeant. I'd guess your Rottweiler interview style has landed you in trouble more than once. Does that make you a wacko?"

"It might if I were compulsive about it, ma'am, but I'm not. You're an educated woman and you play mind games for a living. If I tried fencing with you, I'd probably lose. Sometimes crude works better than finesse."

"Or maybe you're just a jerk."

"My ex-wife would agree with you a hundred percent. But she's still breathing. Your ex isn't. So if you don't mind, Dr. McKenzie, do any of your clients have a history of violence?"

"Client medical records are protected by doctor/patient privilege, as I'm sure you're aware, Detective. But just to ease your mind, this is a publicly funded clinic. We deal in court and social services referrals. The work we do here is considered mental health lite: depression, grief counseling, substance abuse, and domestic-assault counseling. We mostly meet in therapy groups because that's all the HMOs pay for. Violent patients aren't candidates for group therapy and none of my clients know anything of my personal life. They'd have no reason to act out against my husband. Are we done?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, rising. "I really am very sorry for your loss, and if my questions seemed a little rough I apologize. No offense intended." He handed her his card. "If you think of anything that might help, please call me, day or night."

"Yeah," Colleen said, leaning back in her chair, massaging her eyes. "Right."

For a moment her professional facade slipped and she was only

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a woman who'd just received some very bad news. Dylan hesitated in the doorway, watching her. She glanced up.

"Was there something else?"

"No, ma'am," he said. "Sorry."

Rob Bergstrom already had the therapy session underway when Colleen walked in, thank God. Groups at the Institute were led by male/female co-therapists to offer patients a semblance of a nuclear family. Thirtyish, with thinning blond hair and a wardrobe of corduroy sport coats and faded jeans, Rob seemed a tad young for a father figure. He was a good listener, though, and offered perceptive advice, which made him a first-rate partner for Colleen. For therapy sessions, at least.

Colleen took the chair beside Rob in the circle, nodding an apology to the seven members of the group. Three were middle-aged women coping with grief: a murdered child, an incompetent invalid mother, and a husband who'd taken off with a waitress.

The fourth woman, Sherry Stringer, was working through an ugly divorce. Her ex had been stalking her, slashing her tires, spraying her rented home with graffiti. Unfortunately, he was a small-town cop who knew precisely how to avoid being caught.

Sherry'd been an emotional shambles for months, held together by a few threads of hope and the support of the group. She looked a bit more cheerful today, though.

The oldest men in the group were in their early sixties, but they were diametric opposites. Frank Thomas was a retired college prof who'd lost his wife to cancer. Dapper, gracious, and shell-shocked, he seemed to drift through the sessions like a silver-maned, courteous cloud, so insubstantial that Colleen sometimes wondered if she could pass her hand through him.

Jesse Ortiz was Frank's opposite, squat, grizzled, and grumpy as a caged bear. He'd lost his family farm paying for his wife's medical treatment. After her death he'd gone on a six-week bender, got busted in Dearborn, drunk and disorderly, and was ordered into treatment as a condition of probation. Grimly sober now, Jesse was impatient with the sessions. He needed a job, but for a manual laborer whose only work experience was farming, Detroit was a lousy place to be unemployed.

The third man, Gary Noreski, was a balloon, six-three and crowding four hundred pounds, suffering through a work-required weight-loss program. He'd been withdrawn the past few sessions. Was it his medication or more trouble with his promiscuous shrew of a wife? Colleen meant to probe that area in today's meeting.

Not likely. She tried to focus on Mrs. Metcalfe's complaints about her aging mother's irrational demands, but Colleen's memory kept flashing back to fragments of Ian. In the dawn light,

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unshaven and surly. But beautiful. Ian's compact frame was as firm as coiled hemp, corded by years of devoted weight training. Unfortunately, his heart was similarly steeled. . . . They were all looking at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I lost concentration for a moment."

"Mrs. Metcalfe asked if you thought it was more a woman's place to care for a parent," Rob said smoothly. "Her brothers haven't responded to her requests for help."

"A woman bears no more responsibility than a man in such instances, of course," Colleen said, taking Rob's cue. "But with your brothers so far away, the weight may fall more heavily on you. Is that fair? Nope, but there it is. How do the rest of you feel about it? Comments?"

She shot a glance of thanks at Rob as several members offered opinions. The consensus was that Mrs. Metcalfe might have to cope on her own but she was up to it, especially with the encouragement of the group.

Colleen stumbled through the hour like a sleepwalker, half hearing her clients' problems, distracted by flickers of memory. Just as the session was closing, Sherry Stringer, the battered wife, raised her hand to speak.

"I don't know what to make of this, but apparently someone had a . . . serious talk with my husband last week. For the first time since our breakup he's acting halfway human about things. I want to thank the group for helping me through all this. But"—she looked hopefully at each of the men in the circle—"I especially want to thank my guardian angel."

"Praise be," Mrs. Metcalfe said.

"I wasn't talking about a heavenly angel," Sherry continued. "I think mine is a little closer to home."

"How do you mean that?" Gary Noreski asked.

"Somebody broke Tod's arm in three places," Sherry said, trying not to sound smug and failing. "And I hope you all won't think I'm a bad person, but it's the best damned thing that's happened to me in a year."

"*Broke* it?" Noreski pressed. "You mean in a fight?"

"Tod wouldn't say how it happened. He never was much on explanations. But he's definitely had an attitude adjustment. Maybe it'll last as long as the cast stays on."

"But you have no idea who did it?" Colleen pressed.

"Not a clue," Sherry said, glancing around the group. "But I'm grateful to whoever it was, and to the group, of course. Thank you all."

"We're here for you," Rob nodded, "and for each other. Okay, let's sum up what we've covered today to see what we've gained."

Rob deftly carried the ball for the final ten minutes, making

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each client feel special, offering positive reinforcement to help them through the week; he then dismissed the session. He saw the group out, shaking hands at the door like a country parson. Colleen was still in her seat, staring into space.

"Earth to Colleen, what's up? Are you all right?"

"Actually I'm not. I'm sorry about bailing on you."

"Don't be a twerp, McKenzie, the session went fine. Back in L.A. I worked with a psych who not only nodded off in sessions, she even snored sometimes. On the worst day of your professional life you're the best therapist I know, so what's wrong?"

"My . . . my ex-husband was killed this morning. Auto accident."

"Jeez, Colleen, that's awful. I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"A hit-and-run, apparently. Somebody ran him off the road a few miles from our . . . from his house."

"Awful," Rob repeated, shaking his head. "For crying out loud, why didn't you just bag the session? I would have coped."

"You *did* cope," she corrected. "I was absent without leave the whole session. The only thing that registered was Stringer's guardian angel. What was that about?"

"I don't know. Her husband's a cop who likes to muscle people, maybe somebody muscled him back. I'm more concerned about you. Why don't you skip the substance-abuse session this afternoon. I'll be happy to fill in for you."

"You're sure you don't mind subbing?"

"Not at all, but you'd better clear it with the boss. I'm still the new kid on the block."

"She'll be okay with it, especially when I mention the way you carried the weight this morning."

"All praise gratefully accepted. Look, I've got to get home to make lunch for my dad. He hassles the caregiver about meals and I can't afford to have another one quit. Tell Mrs. Dellums I may be a few minutes late but I'll definitely take the session. And you take care of yourself, okay? What do you say we do dinner later in the week, blow off a little steam? My treat."

"I'd like that. Thanks, Rob, for everything."

"You bet." He trotted off, lanky and collegiate in his rumpled jacket, looking more like a grad student than a therapist.

Colleen rapped once on the director's office door and went in. Mavis Dellums was knitting, as usual, one of the countless colorful scarves she gave away to friends and family. She was a matronly African-American grandmother who rarely raised her voice yet ran a multi-million-dollar public mental health clinic with Prussian efficiency.

"Hi," Mavis said. "I heard about your ex. Are you okay?"

"No. I want the afternoon off. Rob Bergstrom offered to take the substance-abuse session."

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"Is he up to it?"

"Absolutely. He's a keeper, Mavis, bright, empathetic, good with patients. I'm jealous."

"Glad to hear it. How's he to work with personally?"

"A solid pro, perceptive, quick on the uptake. I think he'll work out fine."

"Good. He had great references, and a guy who quits a good job to come home and care for his dear old dad can't be all bad no matter what they say."

"No matter what who says?"

"I heard a few rumors from L.A. that he tended to be overly attentive to female clients and had some weird New Age therapy ideas. Any sign of trouble along those lines?"

"You mean does he hit on female clients? Not at all. If anything he's more attentive to the men in the group. As for New Age ideas, he's offered a few suggestions but we're not chanting mantras yet."

"And off the job? Anything there?"

"How do you mean?"

"I thought you two were dating?"

"You're a nosy old woman and no, there's nothing going on. Rob and I had dinner a few times, probably will again, but strictly as friends."

"Good. I hate it when therapists get involved. They always analyze their relationship to death and I end up juggling everybody's schedules to keep the peace. I don't mind juggling yours, though, considering what's happened. Take as much time as you need. How long will that be, do you think?"

"A few days should do it."

"That's not long."

"Ian and I were finished a lifetime ago, Mavis. I've only seen him twice this past year, both times in lawyers' offices. Still, I thought I was in love with him once and . . . frankly, I'm not sure how I feel about it now."

"Divorces are messy even when they're the right thing to do. And yours was. The police were here, by the way. A tall hunk of a detective named Dylan asked me some questions about you."

"You're kidding."

"When you grow up where I grew up, honey, you learn not to joke about cops. He seemed straight enough, might even be a nice guy. But then I'm not the one he had in his sights."

"Neither am I."

"I certainly hope not, hon," Mavis said, returning to her knitting. "We'd sure miss you around here."

Paranoia about Mavis's last crack or raw nerves from the day? Crossing the Institute parking lot, Colleen had an uneasy sense of

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being watched. She quickly unlocked her car, then scanned the lot. And spotted him hurrying after her with his rolling farmer's gait, a man used to walking with a foot in each furrow.

"Doc, can I talk to you? It's important."

"Mr. Ortiz, you know the rules about seeing me after hours. Anything important should be discussed within the group."

"Yeah, well, I ain't sure all this talk is helpin' me much anyway. I'd rather be doin'. My only real trouble was losin' Vera and fallin' into a bottle. I'm past that now and I got a chance—"

"Mr. Ortiz," Colleen said, cutting him off, "I don't mean to be rude, but I have to go. If you have problems you don't feel comfortable discussing in the group, please phone the Institute for a private appointment."

"You ain't listenin'! I ain't worked a real job since I brought my wife up here to the hospital and I can't land nothin' steady if I'm stuck in some meeting."

"Mr. Ortiz—" Colleen fought to control her irritation—"you aren't in group therapy voluntarily, it's a condition of your probation. Any changes have to be okayed by the court. If you make an appointment with either Mr. Bergstrom or myself we'll try to work something out for you. I know you've had a tough time—"

"Lady, you wouldn't know a tough time if one kicked you in the ass. All you people know is talk!"

"Mr. Ortiz, I'm sorry, but I can't do this now. Please make an appointment—"

"—and we can gab some more. Thanks, Doc, you been a big help." He wheeled and stalked off, a gnarled stump of a man as out of place in Detroit as a farm wagon on a freeway.

Damn. Colleen had troubles of her own and seeing clients outside a clinical setting is almost always a mistake. Their needs can overwhelm you, leaving no resources for yourself or anyone else. Colleen knew that, yet the old farmer seemed so . . . lost, that she almost called out for him to come back.

Almost.

Instead she watched him clamber into a battered blue pickup truck and roar angrily off in a cloud of gray exhaust.

It was the last time she saw him alive.

The next few days weren't the breather Colleen needed. Ian's death was not only an emotional minefield, it was news.

She turned a half-dozen reporters from her door with no comment and began screening her calls. Her unlisted number was no help. Newspeople scored it with ease. So much for privacy.

Another development: Ian's death knocked their divorce agreement into a cocked hat. Terms she and her attorney had grimly fought out with Ian's firm were suddenly void. Instead of being

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stuck with the short end of a settlement, she was suddenly the sole titleholder of their home, a boat, and two cars. Even Ian's pension fund and life insurance were hers. Like a roofer whose house leaks like a springtime in Seattle, Ian the meticulous attorney hadn't gotten around to rewriting his will.

The windfall made her feel guilty, but she was too busy settling Ian's affairs to worry about her own emotions. His elderly mother was in the early stages of Alzheimer's and could barely comprehend what had happened. She'd completely forgotten that Colleen and Ian were divorcing, so their conversations were doubly difficult.

The detective, Dylan, left a message on her answering machine one afternoon. No progress to report. Had she thought of anything helpful?

Not a blessed thing. But she almost called him anyway. There was something about him, his spare smile, the intelligence in his eyes, something. They'd met under the lousiest circumstances imaginable. Hell, she was probably still a suspect. What would she say to him? That she was shaken by Ian's death? And felt lousy about profiting from it? Right.

He'd probably lock her up on general principles.

All in all, it was a crummy, nerve-grinding week. And then it crashed.

Late Thursday night Colleen was sipping a glass of white wine, reading while the TV flickered with the sound off, when the phone rang.

"Colleen, it's Rob Bergstrom. God, look, I'm sorry to bother you but . . . it's awful—Colleen, my dad's dead. Shot. Mr. Ortiz shot him."

"What? Rob, slow down, you're not making sense."

"I'm sorry, I—Mr. Ortiz, from our Tuesday therapy group? Jesse Ortiz?"

"Right, the farmer. What about him?"

"He killed my father, Colleen. And himself. Could you come to my house, please? I called nine-one-one. I don't know what else to do, who else to call. Please come."

"Try to stay calm, Rob. Don't touch anything. Go outside and wait for the police. I'll be there as quickly as I can."

Rob's home, his father's actually, was a massive two-story Beaux-Arts brownstone in a cul-de-sac full of them near Douglass High on the east side. The massive old monstrosities had been the rage among Detroit's new rich at the turn of the century, pretentiously styled with tall windows and mansard roofs, but built on lots so small the driveways dividing them could only pass one carriage at a time.

A prowl car and an EMT van were already jammed beside the

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house, flashers flickering eerily off the rain-slick bricks. Colleen parked at the curb behind an unmarked police car, Dylan's, as it happened. He met her halfway up the front walk.

"Dr. McKenzie? What are you doing here?"

"Rob called me. He said his father had been killed."

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. Why did he call you specifically? Why not a clergyman or a lawyer? Why you?"

"Because I'm a friend. Why all the questions?"

"We've got a multiple homicide, ma'am, so bear with me, please. Do you know a Jesse Ortiz?"

"He's one of our clients, yes."

"Client? You mean he's a mental patient?"

"No, I mean client, Detective. He was ordered into therapy as part of a plea-bargain agreement and assigned to one of our groups by the Institute."

"What was his plea agreement about?"

"Drunk and disorderly. His wife died a few months ago. He went on a bender, got into a scuffle in a bar, got arrested, and the judge sent him to us."

"Then he was violent, right? Dangerous?"

Colleen hesitated. "Technically, his treatment is shielded by doctor/patient confidentiality—"

"Technically is the operative word, Doc. You just said he wasn't mental and he's dead anyway so let's not waltz around the rule book, okay? You said he was arrested after a fight. Didn't you and Dr. Bergstrom consider him dangerous?"

"No. He was drunk when he was arrested, nearly toxic in fact, but he had no history of alcohol abuse or violence, no police record at all. The incident was anomalous, triggered by the death of his wife. He got drunk and got into a jam, end of story. He was doing well in therapy. We would have discharged him with a recommendation of unsupervised probation."

"Even so, a guy who gets loaded and beats people up doesn't sound like somebody I'd hire to babysit my dad. Why did Bergstrom do it?"

"Is that what happened?"

"I'm asking you, Doc."

"All I can tell you is that Mr. Ortiz needed work and neither of us considered him a threat. He was a nice old guy who caught a few bad breaks, that's all. Rob's dad is incompetent and I know Rob's had trouble keeping caregivers, so if he hired Mr. Ortiz to babysit, as you put it, I'd have no problem with it. I told Jesse to use me as a reference if he needed one. Now please, what happened here?"

"Well, offhand it looks like your nice old guy killed Dr. Bergstrom's father and then himself, with a handgun. Murder-

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suicide. He also left a note in which he admitted killing your husband."

"What?" Colleen stared at him, as stunned as if he'd struck her. "What are you saying? Ian? Mr. Ortiz killed Ian?"

"That's what the note said, he—Hey, are you all right?"

She wasn't. The world had suddenly gone dark and started wobbling. Dylan seized her shoulders, holding her upright. "Take a deep breath, Doc, that's it. Now, I'm going to ease you down to—"

"It's all right," Colleen said, swallowing hard, gathering herself. "I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

"Well, I am, dammit! Let me go."

"Okay, okay, ease up. You looked a little shaky, that's all. You still do."

"I'll be all right. Now what the hell do you mean, he killed my husband?"

"He admitted doing it in his note, Doc, plus, a paint scrape on his pickup looks like a dead-bang match for your husband's red Porsche. I think he did it all right."

"My God. I—don't understand."

"Yeah, well, for what it's worth, Dr. McKenzie, some homicides don't even make sense to the guy who does 'em. This one has a certain logic to it, though. It looks like Mr. Ortiz decided to check out and wanted to tie up a few loose ends before he went. Do you know a Dearborn cop named Tod Stringer?"

"I—know of him. He's the ex-husband of a patient of mine."

"A domestic-violence case?"

Colleen nodded. "What about him?"

"In the note Ortiz admitted he roughed up Stringer last week. Broke his arm. I just got off the phone with Stringer and he described Ortiz right down to the dirt under his fingernails. If you don't mind my asking, are you and Dr. Bergstrom involved? Romantically, I mean?"

"Romantically? No. Why?"

"No offense, just being thorough. Dr. Bergstrom did call you."

"As a friend and colleague, which I am. We are not now nor have we ever been romantically involved. Is that specific enough for you, Detective?"

"Absolutely. Last question. You and Dr. Bergstrom are both psychologists, right? Would it be possible for a therapist like yourself to influence a patient to commit a crime?"

She stared at him as though he'd grown a second head. He expected her to blow up. She took a deep breath instead.

"Theoretically, Sergeant Dylan, a dysfunctional, tractable patient prone to violent behavior could probably be influenced to commit a violent act by anyone he perceived as an authority fig-

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ure. A psychologist, say, maybe even a *cop*. But Mr. Ortiz was neither violent nor particularly receptive to treatment. In fact, he—" She paused, frowning. "I think he wanted to quit."

"Quit what?"

"The therapy group. He stopped me in the parking lot a few days ago. To be honest, I . . . don't know what he wanted. I was upset, I'd just finished talking to you. And so I just . . . brushed him off." She swallowed. "My God, he may have been trying to talk to me about Ian then."

"Whoa, Doc, take it from a pro, killers are a mixed bag. Some are brain-fried street thugs and some are poor bastards like Ortiz whose lives crash and burn. They're not predictable, so don't beat yourself up; you're a shrink, not a psychic. Besides, if you couldn't make him commit this crime, why would you think you could prevent it?"

Their eyes held for a moment, then Colleen nodded. "I know what you're saying, Detective, but it's not much comfort. He came to the Institute for counseling and . . . here we are. I should have realized he was dysfunctional. It's my job to know. Are we done?"

"Yeah. Look, I'm really sorry about this, not just the questions, but . . . all of it. But I meant what I said about not blaming yourself, Doc. It's a dead-end street. Don't go there. This wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not," Colleen said, "but it sure feels like it. Can I see Rob?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll take you to him."

They found Bergstrom in the kitchen, making coffee. Rumpled and red-eyed, he looked even younger than usual. He embraced Colleen long and hard. "Thanks for being here for me."

Dylan cleared his throat. "Do you mind if I have some coffee?"

"Let me get it," Rob said, separating from Colleen and hurrying to the coffee maker. "I thought we could all use some. Do you have any more questions for me?" The remark was offhand but there was an edge in his tone.

"Not just now. Everything seems to be in order, Dr. Bergstrom, if that's possible in a shambles like this."

"Sorry if I seemed touchy earlier, Detective. I'm a bit dazed."

"Perfectly understandable. Let me know when you're ready to go, Dr. McKenzie, and I'll have a patrolman see you home." He glanced at them over his coffee cup, then wandered out.

"How are you holding up?" Colleen said, turning to Rob.

"I'll live. I know it was selfish of me to call you but I'm glad you came. I was . . . pretty confused at the time. I saw that detective talking to you in front. What did he want?"

"Nothing, really, just background information on Jesse."

"What information?" he asked sharply. "What did you tell him?"

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"The truth. That Jesse had an anomalous incident with alcohol and neither of us considered him at all dangerous."

"Good, that's fine. You're right, of course, but it's one of those situations a nonprofessional might not understand. Maybe we'd better get our stories straight for the boss."

"Our stories?"

"About my hiring Ortiz. I was just trying to give him a break, but with all that's happened it might look better if you said you okayed it."

"I would have, if you'd asked."

"Still, it could help if—"

"Rob, you're overreacting. No one will blame you for what happened, least of all Mavis. I told Mr. Ortiz he could use me as a job reference and—"

"But I'm the new kid, remember," Rob snapped. "It'd just look better if you said you okayed it. Is that asking too much?"

"If you're asking me to lie, then yes, it is too much! Look, I didn't consider Ortiz dangerous either. I'll back you a hundred percent and make sure everyone understands the situation. You won't have any trouble at work, I promise. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Sorry if I bit your head off, I'm halfway up the wall. Thanks for coming out, Colleen. And for standing up for me."

"No charge. Take care, Rob, we'll get through this." She bussed him lightly on the cheek and left him in the kitchen.

Two EMTs were bringing a stretcher down the stairs and she hurried past to avoid seeing it. Her memories of Ortiz were troubling enough already.

Dylan was on the porch, staring out into the rainy darkness.

"How's Dr. Bergstrom doing?"

"He's shaken up, wouldn't you be? No, maybe *you* wouldn't."

"A brilliant psychologist once told me that when you've been through a tunnel a few times you know there's light on the other side," Dylan said drily. "Some people go into a funk around violent death, some get wired on adrenaline like your friend in there. I'll have a patrolman drop you off."

"I'm all right now."

"Humor me, okay? The body count in this case is too high already. I'd drive you myself but I'll be stuck here most of the night. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Why?"

He hesitated. "Actually, I'm not sure why I said that. Reflex, I guess. What do you suppose Freud would make of it?"

"He'd probably say you're getting overly analytical from hanging out with too many therapists."

"He'd be wrong," Dylan said. "Anyway, would you mind if I called you? Just to be sure you're okay?"

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Colleen glanced up at him, surprised. His face was a professional mask that hid his thoughts well. But it wasn't a bad face.

"No," she said. "I wouldn't mind."

The viewing room in the funeral home had deep green carpeting that contrasted beautifully with the oaken furnishings and the burled walnut casket on the dais. Colleen recognized a few coworkers from the Institute but most of the mourners were a generation older, contemporaries of the deceased. Generic organ music droned softly below the muted hum of conversation.

Scanning the room for Rob, Colleen nearly missed him. He was standing near the casket talking with a heavyset woman in a flowered dress and a bearded clergyman. Rob looked strikingly different. Wearing a dark suit, with his hair neatly trimmed, he could have passed for his own older brother. Even his mannerisms seemed weightier, as though he'd aged overnight.

The casket lid was open, so Colleen decided to wait for a better moment to offer condolences. She'd never met Rob's dad in life. It seemed a bit late now.

She found a bench in a corner of the room and glanced around. The room had no obvious connection with faith or mortality. Canned music, plastic plants, as impersonal as a Formica burger joint. McBurials or Kentucky Fried Funerals . . .

"Excuse me, you're Dr. McKenzie, aren't you?" The woman was willowy, with loose, sandy hair, a narrow mouth, and foxy eyes, cover-girl pretty. "I'm Lily Bergstrom, Rob's sister. He's spoken of you so often, I feel like we've already met." She slid smoothly onto the seat beside Colleen.

"I wish we could have met at a better time," Colleen said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"No great loss," Lily said bluntly. "I haven't seen my dad in years. I wouldn't have come today except that Bobby insisted I should show up. I hardly recognized the old man. The stroke sucked all the anger out of his face. The way they've got him made up, he looks more like a Cabbage Patch Kid than the pig he was."

Colleen stared.

"Sorry," Lily said. "I assumed Rob told you about our dear old dad."

"No, he didn't, actually. I knew he was ill, but—"

"Not ill, sick. He was one sick bastard," she said acidly. "A drunken, abusive bastard. My mom ran off when I was five to get away from him. I took off when I was fourteen. Hated to leave Rob behind alone but I had to get out or die trying. The old man took up with Rob where he left off with me, groping him, taking pictures for his sick friends. The kid was tougher than I was, though. He didn't run. Saint Bobby."

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"Saint Bobby?"

"That's the way he struck me, next time I saw him. He'd turned into the perfect kid, trying to keep Pop out of his bedroom. Top grades, active in church, star ballplayer, a regular saint. When he finally left, he didn't have to run away. Full scholarship to UCLA. Got a good job after graduation. But when the old man had his stroke, Rob bagged it all to come home and take care of him. Saint Bobby."

She was smiling, but there was a vicious edge to her tone and she was taut as a pole vaulter on takeoff. "It must have been quite a sacrifice," Colleen said cautiously.

"Personally, I thought he was nuts. Caring for Pop in the same house where he abused us? It may be a classy place, but the memories . . . I don't know how he did it. Or why. You're a shrink, does it make any sense to you?"

"I . . . I really couldn't say."

"No? From what Bobby said, I thought you two were pretty tight."

"We're friends, but we haven't known each other very long."

"Friends? I thought—well, never mind. Sometimes Saint Bobby has trouble talking to us earthly types, especially me. Him and the old man both. I'm sorry, but I've enjoyed about as much of this as I can stand. I've gotta get out of here."

She rose and hurried out of the room, dabbing at her eyes. She was a handsome woman, expensively dressed, and men's heads turned as she passed. But Colleen wouldn't have traded places with her for all the tea in Tijuana.

Rob eased down beside her a moment later. "I saw you talking to Lily. I hope she didn't upset you."

"Not at all, she was . . . interesting. You've never mentioned her."

"We're not close. She ran away when I was a kid and still blames my dad for the problems in her life."

"What kind of problems?"

"Bad marriages, bulimia, drugs, and those are just the troubles I know of. Doubtless there are deeper dysfunctions. Maybe she'll open up a bit more now."

"With your father gone, you mean?"

"Partly that, but I expect I'll have more time for her, too."

"Caring for your dad must have been quite a burden."

"Not really, he was so . . . childlike near the end that it was like we'd traded roles. He could be difficult, but how can you be angry at someone who doesn't know who he is, much less who you are?"

"I can see why Lily calls you Saint Bobby."

"That's her idea of a joke. I've never liked it."

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"Sorry. There is something I need to ask you, though, about what happened."

"The gory details have been covered pretty well in the press."

"Not all of them. There's still something I don't understand. Dylan said Mr. Ortiz was trying to . . . tie up the loose ends of our lives before taking his own. He considered your dad a burden and wanted to free you. But how could he know about my problems with Ian? I certainly never told him."

"Perhaps you did, indirectly. Patients are always curious about our private lives. A word here, a slip there, a rumor somewhere else. He probably knew more than you think."

"But he was from out of town and he resented the group. I doubt he gossiped with anyone after hours. And I *never* discuss my personal affairs around the Institute."

"But I knew about it? Is that where you're going with this? All right, maybe it was my fault. I hired Jesse to sit with my dad a few days a week so I could have *some* kind of a life. A few times after I came home he stayed on and we'd have a beer and talk. Your name may have come up."

"May have?" she echoed in disbelief. "Are you saying you told a patient about my private life?"

"I said *maybe*. It was late, I don't recall all we talked about, and it's a moot point anyway. Let's just put it behind us and move on. And I'd better get back to glad-handing my guests. Thanks for coming by."

He bussed her coolly on the cheek, rose, and sauntered back toward a group near the casket. As he approached them his face assumed a somber cast of melancholy, utterly sincere.

Colleen sat a few minutes, watching him thoughtfully. Then, just before the services began, she rose and slipped out.

She was wandering down the corridor, lost in thought, when a wall placard beside another viewing room caught her eye. Ortiz. Damn. She was strongly tempted to move on. Instead, she squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

The chapel was a smaller version of the one she'd just left, but with no minister, no mourners. A stocky young girl, visibly pregnant, sat alone in the front row near the closed casket. She was wearing a faded denim shift and her dark hair hung to her waist in a thick braid.

The girl glanced up as Colleen approached. She seemed dazed, numb.

"Hello," Colleen said. "Are you Jennifer Ortiz?"

The girl nodded. "Did you know my dad?"

"He was my client. I'm Dr. McKenzie."

"McKenzie?" She blinked, then her face flushed with rising

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anger. "Sweet Jesus, you've got a lotta sand, lady. The judge sends him to your clinic for gettin' drunk and now the cops say he killed people he didn't even know? And then himself? What the hell did you people do to him?"

"Jennifer, believe me, I'm as much at a loss—"

"Believe you, my ass. All I know is he went to you for help and he's dead. The rest don't matter anymore. Leave us alone."

"I'm sorry," Colleen said. "I truly am. I know you're angry with me and you probably have a right to be, but if I can help in any way . . . call me, please."

"I think you've helped enough already. If I was you I'd get goin' while you still can." But as Colleen turned away, Jennifer grabbed her arm.

"Hey! Just tell me one thing, Doc. Was this—was it my fault? Bein' pregnant with no husband? Is that why he did it?"

"No, it wasn't that. He was angry at first, but the last few sessions he said he was looking forward to the baby. To having new life in the family."

"But if it wasn't me, why did he do this? You're the big head doctor. Why did my dad crack up?"

"I don't know. I'm very sorry, I—" But Jennifer turned abruptly away, burying her face in her hands. And Colleen had no answers for her anyway.

Colleen climbed into her Volvo and automatically checked her cell phone for messages. The screen showed two calls while she'd been inside. Her mother and a number she didn't recognize. She tapped it in.

"Salvati Lawn Care, Geno speaking."

"Hello, this is Dr. McKenzie returning your call?"

"Oh yeah, thanks for callin' back. Hey, I hired a guy last week, older guy named Ortiz? He listed you as a reference."

Colleen's heart sank. "Yes?"

"So he worked a few days, did a helluva job, then he never came back. No answer at the number he gave me. What's up with him? Didn't seem like the kind to just take off. Besides, I still owe him three days' wages."

Colleen started to explain, then hesitated. "You said he worked three days?"

"Yeah, he was a godsend. Knew the mowin' machinery backwards and forwards; he liked bein' outside and he could outwork any three of the young punks I usually hire. I bumped him up two bucks over minimum wage the second day and said if he stuck with me a couple weeks I had a foreman's slot opening up."

"A foreman's slot?"

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"You know, runnin' his own crew? It's still outside work, but it pays twenty-two bucks an hour."

"Twenty-two . . . and he knew about this?"

"Sure. Seemed real keen on the idea. Said he'd have to get his schedule squared away, so when he missed a couple days I figured he was gettin' things straight. Does he work for you?"

"No, he doesn't. Mr. Salvati, there's no easy way to say this. Mr. Ortiz passed away a few days ago."

"You're kiddin'."

"No, sir, I'm not."

"But—Jesus, he seemed strong as a horse. What happened?"

"I honestly don't know," Colleen said. She gave him the name of the funeral home and suggested he contact Ortiz's daughter about his unpaid wages. Then she sat in the parking lot for what seemed like a very long time. A rumble of thunder snapped her back to reality. It was starting to rain, a chill autumn drizzle coming on with the dusk. She fished through her purse, found a business card, and made a call.

It was a handsome older home in a solid working-class neighborhood, a large porch with a swing, lilacs in the yard.

Colleen couldn't see any lights but hurried to the porch through the rain and rang the buzzer. Dylan answered the door in a dark shirt with a tie and dress slacks.

"Hi," Colleen said, "I'm sorry to bother you at home."

"No problem, I just finished dinner. Come on in."

An old-fashioned living room, hardwood floors, comfortable leather furniture, a small fire smoldering in the grate. In the adjoining dining room the table was formally set with white linen and silver candlesticks, the candles burned a quarter of the way down.

"I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

"Not exactly. *Hoy de mi alma.* Soul day. My ex-wife's idea. She said I was spending so much time with street thugs that I was turning into one. So, once a week I try to have a real meal and behave like a human being. One day for my soul. The rest of the week . . ." He shrugged. "I can turn up the lights if you like."

"No, this is fine. It suits my mood."

"That bad, huh? Sit down, please. I was going to have some wine, a zinfandel, would you care for some? No? Then I'll wait too. This isn't social, is it?"

"I'm not sure where to start," Colleen said, taking a seat midway down the table. "Look, I know we can't be totally off the record, so I won't ask for that, but I really need some straight answers from you. Okay?"

"If I can, sure."

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"Okay. Question one: Do you have any . . . misgivings about this Ortiz business?"

"Should I have?"

"Tell you what, Detective, if you'd rather not discuss this, I understand. But if you're just going to answer my questions with more questions, I'm outa here. Okay?"

"Okay." He smiled. A good smile. "That's another reason I hate shrinks. You're hard to snow. Okay, straight up, yes, I have some reservations about the Ortiz case. But homicide's a messy business. Most cases have loose ends, contradictory evidence, witness statements, whatever. Misgivings are normal. Why are you asking?"

She took a deep breath. "A few things have come up, nothing concrete, you understand, just . . . things that make me wonder about what happened."

"What things?"

"Jesse Ortiz was in therapy as a condition of a plea bargain for a drunk and disorderly bust, but his real problem was depression. His wife had died, her illness cost him a farm he'd owned for thirty years, and he couldn't find work."

"Sounds like he had reason to be depressed."

"You bet he did. Behavioral problems are often rooted in reality. But today I learned that Jesse found a job last week, a good job doing the kind of work he liked."

"So you're saying he wouldn't have committed suicide?"

"It's not that simple. Sometimes a positive development can intensify depression. A good thing happens but you're still drowning in darkness. Life seems even more hopeless than before. It sounds backwards, but a positive development can actually push a depressive over the line into violence or suicide."

"Okay, I follow that. Is that what happened with Ortiz?"

"In my professional opinion, Jesse Ortiz wasn't that sort of patient. His depression was conditional and an improvement of his situation—a new job—should have helped him. But another therapist could look at the same circumstances and draw the opposite conclusion."

"But they'd be looking at his record. You knew him."

"And maybe that's my problem. His suicide means I did a lousy job of diagnosis and I'm partly responsible for his death."

"You're being kind of rough on yourself, aren't you?"

"Just being . . . what did you call it? Straight up."

"Fair enough. But for the record, Doc, this is a closed case. We have a gun, a note, the guy had a history of violence. The pieces all fit."

"You had all of those pieces at the scene, but you still asked me if Ortiz could have been brainwashed into doing what he did. So you had some doubts too, right? Why?"

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"There were a couple of small things," Dylan admitted. "Dr. Bergstrom had an alibi. He'd been to a movie and they remembered him there, joking with the ticket taker. Afterward, he had a bite at Denny's and a waitress remembered him kidding around, a real charmer."

"Let me get this straight. It bothered you *because* he had an alibi?"

"A little," he said, smiling. "Most people don't have alibis. You didn't, remember? They're asleep or watching TV alone, assuming they can even remember where they were. But Bergstrom? He could account for his movements to the minute and knew he could prove it. And I got the feeling he enjoyed telling me about it, like he'd aced an exam or something. His attitude didn't match up with the situation."

"Maybe that's because the situation wasn't quite what you thought it was. I thought Rob was caring for his father out of the goodness of his heart, but his sister tells me the father was an abusive drunk that they both despised. Apparently Rob had no reason to mourn his father's death."

"And most kids hate their fathers at some point, then change their minds later. Bergstrom's a trained therapist. He probably reacts to things differently than Joe Six-pack might."

"The fact that he's a trained therapist is the second part of my problem," Colleen sighed. "Mr. Ortiz confessed to killing Ian. But he had no reason to."

"We assumed he did it for the same reason he took out Bergstrom's father, as a kind of going-away present for you."

"But I don't believe he knew about my problems with Ian. Therapists never discuss their private lives with patients. I certainly didn't with Ortiz. But Rob implied that I may have, then admitted he told Ortiz about Ian. And he's far too good a therapist to make a mistake like that."

"Even so, talking to Ortiz about you is no crime."

"All I'm saying is that it doesn't fit. I've got this awful feeling that something's wrong about this. I'm just not bright enough or experienced enough to know what it is."

"And you think I am?"

"I don't know. If my car was running rough, I'd see a mechanic. Well, this case is running rough for me. I guess what I'm asking you for is a professional opinion."

"Okay, professionally speaking, Doc, you've got zip. I got a hinky feeling about the way Bergstrom answered questions and you have doubts about Ortiz's mental state, but those aren't facts. Here's the hard evidence: Ortiz was dead at the scene and had a history of violence. Paint found on the bumper of his pickup truck matched your husband's Porsche, and Tod Stringer, that wife-

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beater Ortiz roughed up, positively identified him. Ortiz left a suicide note and the handwriting's definitely his. Any more questions?"

"Just one. The suicide note? Did it say something like, I feel bad about my wife and Mrs. McKenzie's husband and Rob's dad and Tod Stringer—"

"Not Stringer. He mentioned him, but said he wasn't sorry he knocked him around. But the rest, yeah, that's roughly what it said."

"And was it crumpled?"

Dylan eyed her a moment. "Yes, it was. Like it had been wadded up then smoothed out. Why?"

"There's a technique some New Age therapists use. You list the things that are contributing to your feelings of depression then put them behind you by wadding up the list and throwing it away."

"Doesn't sound very scientific."

"It's not meant to be a cure, it's just part of a process and not one I use myself."

"Did Bergstrom?"

"He mentioned using it once in L.A. We never tried it in our therapy group, but he and Jesse were together in the evenings. It's possible he did it then."

Dylan shook his head slowly, a faint smile playing about his mouth. "Now *that's* interesting. Not evidence, exactly, but interesting. Because if you take away the note—No, wait a minute—Stringer identified Ortiz."

"That part fits. Jesse was impatient with therapy. Mrs. Stringer's husband was giving her a tough time so Jesse did something about it."

"Yeah, he broke Stringer's arm in three places."

"Trust me, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy."

"Even so, it indicates Ortiz was violent."

"It also shows that he dealt with problems head-on. Most suicides can't cope with their problems, so they bail out. Jesse worked at a new job three days and the boss wanted to make him a foreman. He was a problem solver, not a quitter, and things were looking up for him."

"I see." He bridged his fingers and eyed her across them. "Have you considered where this is going? I mean, *really* considered it? Because if Ortiz wasn't suicidal, that only leaves two alternatives. One: that he was conned into committing murder with some mind game, which you say is impossible, or two: He didn't do it at all. Which leaves me with only one viable candidate. You."

"Me?"

"Sure. Bergstrom's got an alibi, you haven't. You were angry with your husband, you profited by his death, plus you play mind

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games for a living. Maybe you conned Ortiz into killing your husband then did Bergstrom senior and Ortiz to cover your tracks."

"For pete's sake, Dylan, I came to you! I'm . . . you're jerking my chain, aren't you?"

"Yeah, just a little. Payback for having my nice neat murder case kicked slightly in the head. The thing is, Doc, if everything you told me is true, pulling off a multiple homicide as cold as this one would take one very special cat. So what's your best guess? Is Bergstrom capable of something like this?"

"No. I mean, I don't . . ." She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think so. His sister calls him Saint Bobby. Maybe she's right. Maybe I'm misreading the whole thing."

"Is that what you think?"

"No. I hate what I'm thinking. I can hardly believe it. But I can't ignore it either. What are we going to do?"

"What *you* do is pretend we never had this conversation and get on with your life. I'm going to do what the city pays me for and look into things. Meantime, maybe we should have that glass of wine now."

"No, thank you, I'd better go. I'm sorry if I messed up your special day."

"You didn't. In fact, while we're being straight up with each other, I'll tell you one last thing. I wanted to meet you outside of business hours that first day. I thought you were bright and interesting and . . . well, anyway, you didn't mess anything up by coming here."

"Except your neatly closed murder case."

"Yeah. You may have done a number on that. Too early to say. Thanks for coming by anyway."

She turned to go, then hesitated. "Dylan? What you said about wanting to meet off duty? Your timing is terrible."

"You're right. Sorry."

"Oh, I didn't say it was a bad idea," she said with a wan smile, "just bad timing. You'll call me if anything turns up?"

"Yes, ma'am. Count on it."

The Tuesday session was quiet as a tomb when Colleen walked in, no conversational buzz, none of the usual pre-meeting banter. Gary Noreski, the obese schoolteacher, was absent. Couldn't blame him. The press had a field day with the story. "Deranged Mental Patient Kills Therapists' Kin." Mavis had barred reporters from the building but they were still staked out across the street filming clients and trying to interview them as they entered or left the parking lot.

Bergstrom hadn't shown up either, no surprise considering all that had happened. Colleen waited a few minutes past the hour to

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give any latecomers time to arrive, but as she was closing the door it was suddenly blocked from the other side. Rob met her eyes from inches away.

"Starting without me?" he asked, breezing past her. "Hi, everybody, sorry I'm late. I had to crawl on my belly like a reptile to sneak past the reporters." He flopped his briefcase on the desk, then took a moment to scan the faces in the room, as if memorizing them.

"I can't tell you how much it means to me that you all came today. As you know, Colleen and I have both suffered a loss, but so have you. A member of our extended family is gone. But make no mistake, despite what the press says, Jesse Ortiz didn't throw his life away." CeeJay slipped into her usual seat. No one noticed; Rob had their total focus.

"After such a terrible incident, it's a time for truth," he continued, pacing like a tiger in the ring of chairs, "a time for learning. And this is the lesson I've taken from Jesse's death: Jesse was willing to give everything for us. Not just for Dr. McKenzie and myself, but for all of us here. Our family. Because he understood that we truly are a family. That's why he sacrificed himself.

"We aren't a 'birth' family, accidentally tied by DNA or marriage vows. Jesse's truth is that we have more in common with the people in this room than we ever did with our blood relatives. We've all shared things with each other that we never told our parents. Isn't that so?"

Nods and murmurs of assent rippled around the ring. They were rapt as rabbits dazzled by headlights. When Rob asked for their personal thoughts about Jesse's death and his own and Colleen's situation, the group offered an outpouring of support and empathy that would have warmed a Tartar's heart.

But it chilled CeeJay. The change in Bergstrom's personality was so profound she scarcely recognized him. His boyishness had burned away, leaving a reptilian charm glossed with a warm sheen of confidence.

The group sensed the transformation too, and were drawn to him like travelers warming themselves at a fire. They'd been walking wounded, hoping therapy would heal their pain, but Rob was offering a stronger solution, something larger and better than themselves, a New Age family bonded by a blood sacrifice. Headed by their own personal saint.

Colleen tried to redirect the group to a standard therapy session but it was like wrestling a sponge. They politely absorbed her efforts then veered back to the exciting idea of the group as a supportive New Age clan. When she walked out near the session's end, no one noticed.

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Afterward, Colleen was in the closet bathroom in her office, splashing cold water on her face, when her office door opened.

"Are you all right?" Rob called.

"I'm fine." She stepped out, drying her face with a towel.

"You left early," he said, casually parking a hip on her desk. "Still upset?"

"I'm more upset by what you were doing in there. That wasn't group therapy. It was more like a revival meeting in a cargo cult."

"That's a little heavy, isn't it?"

"No, I don't think so. You know damned well that involving clients in one another's lives isn't proper therapy, and what's all this talk about the group as an extended family? What the hell methodology is that?"

"We gave Jesse Ortiz traditional, by-the-book counseling and look what it got him. And us. I'm just trying to expand the envelope a little. I used some of these techniques in L.A. and they were quite effective. And if I go a little overboard, you're there to haul me back, right?"

"I'm there to help our clients, not keep you on track. You're over the line and you know it!"

"Hey, hey, chill out, Colleen. After what we've been through it's no wonder we're barking at each other. Tell you what, let's take off next weekend. Catch a little sun, relax. Cozumel, maybe. Ever been there?"

She stared at him as though he'd suddenly started speaking Cantonese. "You mean . . . Mexico?"

"That's where it was the last time I looked. The Mayan ruins are wonderful and I'll grab the tab. I'm a man of means now. What do you say?"

"I—don't know what to say—" The phone on her desk gurgled. Rob picked it up and handed it to her.

"Hi," Dylan said. "Is my timing any better?"

"Hi, Mom," she answered. "Not really. I'm kind of busy now."

"Is Bergstrom with you?"

"Sure, that'll be fine. Why don't I meet you and Aunt Gertrude for lunch? The Capri, one o'clock? Good. Love ya. Bye. —My mother," she said, replacing the handset.

"I gathered. Lunch date? I was hoping we could go someplace, maybe talk through a few things. Heck, let's do it anyway. I'd love to meet your family. I'll even buy."

"No, today wouldn't be a good time. My mom thought the sun rose and set on Ian. This business has her pretty upset. I'd better go alone. We can do something later in the week, okay?"

"And Mexico?"

"Let's talk about it then. To be honest, I don't think I'm quite as

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. . . resilient as you are. Right now I'm just getting through the day an hour at a time."

"I understand," Rob said, bussing her on the temple. "I really do. Enjoy your lunch. We'll talk later."

Villa Capri was as Italian as its name: dark wood, small booths, fragrant ferns, and a staff that actually enjoyed their work. Dylan was waiting at a corner booth away from the windows. He rose as she approached.

"Hi, I hope you don't mind munching in the shadows. I doubt I could pass for your mom."

"You think he'd follow me?"

"To be honest, I think I've underrated this guy from the git. And you look as worried as I feel. What's up?"

"Saint Bobby is. He's like a new man." She slid into the booth across from him. "He was more like an evangelist than a psychologist today. As though he buried his boyhood with his father. He not only tossed out the rule book, he didn't even pretend to care. Then he invited me for a weekend in Cozumel."

"Well, he can probably afford it. His father's estate is substantial and he padded dear old Dad's insurance policy to boot, added a term life policy that pays double in case of accidental death. And surprise, according to the policy, murder qualifies as an accident."

"But doesn't that prove he was planning something?"

"Nope. It looks suspicious, all right, but buying insurance isn't illegal, I've done it myself. There's more. His alibi isn't as tight as I thought. The movie he went to was at a multiplex. He could have left anytime, walked home, and made it back in time to join the post-movie crowd at Denny's. I can't prove he did, of course, but it's possible."

"Terrific."

"Don't give up, I've saved the best for last. The paraffin test on Ortiz was positive—he definitely fired a weapon—but an area on the back of his hand showed very little gunpowder residue, which strongly indicates someone held his hand when Ortiz fired the gun. It's the first solid bit of evidence we've turned up."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It means the killer understood the paraffin test. There were three shots fired. He popped Ortiz, then the old man, then put the gun in Ortiz's hand and fired again to be sure he'd test positive."

"And that's why there was no residue where he held his hand. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"What is it?"

"I guess I hadn't thought through the . . . mechanics of it, how cold-blooded and brutal it must have been. To plan and carry it

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out . . . my God. But that's how it happened, isn't it? The paraffin test proves it."

"It's a strong indication, but it's not enough. Any competent attorney could blow it off as a faulty test. My best shot would be to question Bergstrom about it, try to break him down."

"I don't think so," Colleen said thoughtfully. "Rob's a trained psychotherapist. He's conducted thousands of interviews, alert to every word, every shift in body language. He wouldn't break. It'd put him on his guard and we'd lose our only edge."

"What edge? Near as I can see, the guy's batting a thousand."

"And that's our edge. His confidence. Right now he's skying, on top of the world. He destroyed the monster who abused him, he's going to be rich and free as the air. He's smashed the ultimate taboo. He thinks he's gotten away with murder."

"Yeah, well, maybe he has."

"But it won't be enough," Colleen mused. "You said when he told you about his alibi, he almost gloated, remember? That's the key to him. He was abused as a child, abandoned by his mother and then his sister. So he became this charming overachiever his sister calls Saint Bobby. We all want to be admired, but he *needs* it, just to feel whole. It must be terribly frustrating for him. He's pulled off this amazing feat but no one knows it."

"But that's the point, isn't it?"

"But it's also our edge. Because deep down, he really wants people to know how clever he is. And how powerful."

"I don't think I like where you're going with this."

"Neither do I, but I think under the right circumstances he might tell me about it."

"Why you?"

"Because he likes me. A feeling that's reinforced because we serve as a family unit in the group. But most of all, because—" she took a deep breath—"because I think he killed my husband for me."

"*For* you? You want to run that by me in English?"

"The way I see it, he came back for revenge. Abused children who run away often continue to see the adult abuser as powerful, even after they're adults themselves."

"So when Bergstrom's father had a stroke . . . ?"

"Exactly. He knew he'd be helpless and wanted to get even. He was probably already planning the killing when Ortiz told him about roughing up Tod Stringer and Rob realized he had a perfect fall guy. But if he framed Ortiz for killing his father, there might be questions."

"So you think he used Ortiz's truck to kill your husband to make it look like a serial crime? And also set you free?"

"Something like that." She nodded.

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"It's possible," Dylan conceded. "It's also possible he was setting you up to take the fall. Think about it. The evidence could easily apply to you: motive, opportunity, the works. So maybe he wasn't helping you out; maybe he was just covering his tracks and doesn't give a damn about you. And if you casually ask him about it, how long do you think you'll keep breathing?"

"Then what should I do? Admit he's outsmarted us and pop off for a wild weekend in Cozumel?"

"Dammit, Doc, this is no joke! If this guy's guilty, it means he screwed that pistol into Ortiz's ear, scattered his brains all over the wall, shot his father, then waltzed into Denny's a few minutes later and yukked it up with a waitress!"

"Lower your voice, people are staring! I know there are risks but I'm not an amateur and I have some insight into the way he thinks. But we can't wait. He's a danger to my patients, and if I try to have him removed his guard will go up. We have to try while he's still cocky and hope he'll make a mistake. Bottom line: I don't see any other way. Do you?"

Dylan hesitated, then slowly shook his head. "No, dammit, I don't."

"All right then, how do we go about it? You're the expert."

"No, I'm not. Most homicides I handle are gang killings or family fights. Saint Bobby's something else. So far, he's outsmarted me every step of the way. I've never tangled with anyone like him before and neither have you. He's bright, he's dangerous, and he's not gonna give it up just because you flash him a smile over lunch."

"Actually, I can only think of one place where he might feel free to talk to me. But I don't think you'll like it."

"I don't like it already. What is it?"

Colleen left the restaurant first, blinking as she stepped into the autumn afternoon. Deep in her own thoughts, she didn't notice a hunter-green Bravada with blacked-out windows parked up the street.

Sitting behind its wheel, Rob stiffened when Colleen emerged. He reached for the ignition, hesitated, then he settled back to wait. When Dylan came out of the restaurant ten minutes later, Rob nodded to himself, fired up the Bravada, and eased slowly into traffic.

"It looks a lot different from the other night," Colleen said, glancing around Rob's living room. "Did the police make much of a mess?"

"Nothing the maid service couldn't handle. I cleaned up my father's room myself, of course, I couldn't ask them to do that."

"Did it bother you? Cleaning up, I mean?"

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"A little, but it's my home now and it had to be done. I picked up some Hunan Chinese for dinner, is that all right?"

"Perfect."

"Here, let me take your coat," he said, helping her slip off her windbreaker. She was wearing a two-piece Armani business suit, ecru. "You look lovely. I'll admit I was a little surprised when you suggested a quiet dinner here."

"You invite me for a wild weekend in Cozumel and you're surprised I'd rather spend time with you first? What kind of girl do you think I am?"

"I'm looking forward to finding out," he said blandly, hanging her coat in the closet. "How was lunch with your mother yesterday?"

He was facing away from her, but she caught the faintest hint of an edge in his tone. "I . . . didn't have lunch with my mom, actually. I wound up seeing that cop, Dylan, instead."

"No kidding? How did that happen?"

"He called and asked me to lunch so I canceled Mom. I thought talking to him might be more helpful."

"Helpful how?"

"I wanted to know where the investigation was and what he thinks."

"And what *does* the good detective think?"

"Not much. He's like a puppy who smells smoke on the wind. He has a vague sense that something's wrong but no idea what. So eventually he'll lose interest and go back to chasing his tail."

"Very poetic. But if he's chasing his tail, why did he ask you to lunch?"

"Don't be dense. He's got a thing for me. Is that so hard to believe?"

"Not at all. And do you have a *thing* for him?"

"For Dylan? Hardly. He's a drone, an ordinary little man. I suppose he's attractive in a way, but not very bright. Let's eat, supper's getting cold."

On the rooftop of the building next door, Sergeant Linell Tatum winced as he tugged his headphones off, then rolled his bulky frame over to face Dylan, who was watching the house across the narrow alley with binoculars.

"She's right about one thing, Dylan, you're not very bright. And now he's turned on the freakin' stereo. Damn it, we're too high up here, too much wind. With all the background noise I'm only getting every other line. This shotgun mike's too touchy at this distance."

"She'll get him upstairs," Dylan said. "In the room right across from us. We'll get better reception there."

"Assumin' the freakin' wind ain't blown us both offa here by then."

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"It's only a two-story drop, Linell. You're so big you'll probably just bounce anyway."

"No way. I'll make a dent so deep they'll just fill in the hole and drop a stone on top. Here lies Linell Tatum, frozen to death in the line of stupidity." Still grumbling, he turned back to refocus the shotgun mike on the window below.

They had white wine with dinner, but only one glass each, both wary. "I have a confession to make," Colleen said abruptly. "I had an ulterior motive for inviting myself over tonight."

"Really? Will I like it?"

"I don't know. Can I see the room where it happened?"

"That's a bit morbid, isn't it?"

"I'll admit I'm curious. Wouldn't you be?"

"Yes, I suppose so. All right, if you're sure it's what you want, it's this way." He led her up the broad staircase to the second floor. "In there."

She glanced around the immaculate bedroom, her lips pursed. The drapes were open and the tall casement window offered a clear view of the building next door. Colleen moved past it and sat on the edge of the bed. Rob stayed in the doorway, watching her.

"Well? What do you think?"

"I think it wasn't your father's room originally," she said, quietly. "It was your room, wasn't it? When you were a kid?"

"A lucky guess?"

"No, your roles were reversed. He was the child and you were the man. It's natural that you'd put him here. A kind of poetic justice."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"I think you do. I know you're bright, Rob, everyone does. But I also think there's more than self-interest in some of the things you do."

"You're talking in circles, Colleen. You're usually pretty direct."

"Sorry, I'm a little nervous about this. If I'm wrong, you'll think I'm a fool and I'd hate that. But you're right, between us, direct is better. So: I told you that Ian and I separated because he cheated on me. Classic midlife crisis, the shiny new sports car, a younger woman. It was pathetic, but it still hurt, especially when he threatened to stall our divorce indefinitely unless I settled. So I did."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"It wasn't the brave choice, but it was the smart one. A court battle would have wiped me out financially. Still, you can't imagine how much I hated him. And that damned adolescent car of his. Or can you?"

"I suppose I can empathize, sure."

"I'm not talking about empathy, Rob, I'm talking about action. I'll spell it out. I know you had your own reasons for . . . doing

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what you did. But I'd like to know one small thing: Did you consider, even for a moment, the poetry in killing Ian in that car? Or was it just convenient?"

He eyed her in silence a moment. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," she said, rising abruptly from the bed. "I've apparently misread things completely. I'd better go."

"Wait a minute," he said, waving her back. "One day you're having lunch with a cop, the next you're asking me about murder. What am I supposed to think?"

"Nothing. It was my mistake. I thought . . . it doesn't matter what I thought now. Let's call it a night."

He seized her arm as she moved past him. "It was both," he whispered. "It was convenient *and* it was poetic."

Only inches apart, their eyes held for what seemed like a lifetime to Colleen. His gaze was so intense she fought to remind herself that evil or not, psychotic or not, he was only human. He couldn't read her thoughts. Could he?

"I . . . knew it," she breathed. "I knew you were special the first time Mavis introduced us. I want to know about it. It must have been difficult, Ian was an excellent driver."

"Ninety-one percent of American males think they're excellent drivers. Some of us actually are, but Ortiz's pickup was no match for a Porsche on the open road so I scouted out a side road that offered the right angle for the collision."

"But how did you get Ortiz's truck?"

"He let me borrow it when he sat with my dad. I said my car was on the blink and he never questioned it. After the crash I said someone clipped his bumper in a parking lot and gave him a few hundred bucks to repair it. I knew he'd keep the money and skip the repairs. One more dent hardly mattered."

"I knew you were bright," she breathed, "but even so, I think I underestimated you."

"People often do," he said, running his hands down her body. "In more ways than you can imagine."

"Stop that!" she said sharply.

On the roof across the alley, Dylan bolted to his feet. Stunned, Rob stared at him, wide-eyed, then whirled on Colleen.

"You incredible bitch!" he roared, flailing wildly at her. "You set me up!"

Ducking his first blow, she swung back hard and caught him flush on the jaw, snapping his head around. But he was too strong, too enraged. Grabbing her lapels, he slammed her into the wall, stunning her, then snaked his forearm around her throat and hauled her to the window in view of the roof across the alley.

"Back off!" he roared at Tatum, who'd risen and drawn his

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weapon. Dylan had vanished. "Back off or I'll jump and take her down with me! I swear to God, I'll—"

He never finished. Dylan suddenly sprinted past Tatum. Running full tilt to the edge of the roof, he launched himself across the gap between the buildings, pinwheeling his arms to maintain his balance.

The bedroom window exploded inward in a maelstrom of splintering wood and shattered glass as Dylan cannoned into Rob and Colleen, knocking them sprawling back into the room.

Colleen slammed into a dresser and went down, stunned, unable to think or even breathe. In the sudden silence the only sound was the tinkling of glass shards dropping from the ruined window.

Groaning, Dylan tried to raise himself, then slumped facedown beside the wall. The sound of his pain galvanized Colleen with a strength she scarcely recognized. Struggling to her hands and knees, she shook her head to clear it, then crawled to Dylan through the broken glass on the carpet.

He was unconscious, bleeding from a dozen gashes in his face. She groped for the pulse at his throat. It was racing but seemed strong. Her hand came away bloody.

"Dylan? Are you okay?" Tatum called from across the alley. "Damn it, answer me!"

His voice roused Bergstrom instead. He sat up stiffly and looked around, dazed, until his eyes came to rest on Colleen. Then awareness flooded into them, and madness, and a killing rage. Staggering to his feet, he cast about for a weapon, snatched up a brass lamp, yanked the cord out of the wall, and started for her.

Desperately she fumbled inside Dylan's coat and pulled his weapon free. Her hands were trembling so fiercely it was all she could do to point the ugly black automatic in Rob's general direction. Still, he hesitated.

"You have no idea how to fire that gun," he said, licking his lips. "I can brain you before you get off a shot."

"Maybe you're right," she admitted. "But you're a bright guy, Doctor. Do you really want to bet your life on it?"

Dylan groaned as Colleen brushed past the curtain into the cubicle in the emergency room. "Go ahead and say it," he said. "I blew it. I almost got you killed."

"By standing up when you did? Well, you certainly brought things to a head. Why did you do it, by the way?"

"I've been asking myself the same damn thing every time they tweeze another glass splinter out of me. Blind instinct is the best I've been able to come up with. When I heard you tell him to stop, I thought you were being hurt and I . . . reacted. It was a bonehead move. I'm really sorry."

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"Don't be. You didn't see his eyes," she said, shivering. "I counted on his intelligence, thought I could reason with him. I was wrong. I've seen a lot of troubled people in my work, kids who've killed parents, husbands who've killed wives, but never anyone like Rob. I hope to God you got a good recording of his confession."

"A ten-by-ten perfect take. With luck, he'll draw triple life, thanks to you. And speaking of thanks, I guess I should thank you for saving my neck. Tatum said when he got there you were holding Bergstrom off with my weapon."

"A bluff. I don't know doodley about guns. I didn't know how to fire it."

"Then it was an even braver thing to do."

"You've got to be kidding. Jumping across that alley was the bravest thing I've ever seen. I'll never . . . why are you smiling?"

"To tell you the truth, I'd been watching the building through binoculars for a while and I completely misjudged the distance. I thought it was a lot closer than it was."

"So you're not really brave, only stupid? That's your story? Are you always this modest?"

"Not modest, just honest. I deal with so many lies every day, sometimes I almost lose track of what's true. I don't want that to happen with you."

"Why not?"

Their eyes met and held a moment. "You're the doctor. You can probably guess."

"You said once I was a shrink, not a psychic. You were right. So suppose we discuss this later, under more . . . comfortable circumstances. Meanwhile, would you mind if I keep on thinking you were just a little bit brave?"

"No," he said, easing back on his pillow, closing his eyes. "I can live with that." ●

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THE PHANTOM LOVER

by Edward D. Hoch

A longtime favorite of Hoch fans, Captain Leopold may finally be retiring in earnest, to give his once second-in-command, Captain Fletcher, his moment in the spotlight. True Leopold fans needn't despair, though. Leopold remains a background character in this new adventure, a friend and confidant, and occasionally an advisor, to Fletcher and rising star Sergeant Connie Trent.

Captain Fletcher first heard about Lynn Falkner's missing husband on Labor Day. He and his wife Carol usually went over to the Leopolds' house for their traditional holiday cookout, but this year Fletcher had invited Leopold up to his newly purchased cottage on Lake Conn, about forty-five minutes north of the city.

"It's someplace to get away to," Fletcher explained as he showed Leopold and Molly around. "I only wish we could have afforded it while the kids were still young."

"The years go by too fast," Molly said with a sigh, glancing over at her husband.

Leopold had grown older. There was no denying it. Fletcher still tried to keep him occupied with old unsolved cases from the department files, and Leopold's reasoning powers were as good as they'd been when he was Fletcher's superior on the Violent Crimes Squad. But his body was slowing down, and Fletcher and Molly both knew it.

"Beautiful place you've got here," Leopold said, leaning on the deck railing as he gazed out at the shimmering lake, its waters broken now and again by holiday boaters anxious to get in one last cruise before summer's end.

Molly was helping Carol with the food preparation and Leopold asked, "Got any more open cases for me to work on?"

"I'll take a look at the files. You did a good job on that last one."

"The Christmas trees? That was just luck." From the cottage came the ringing of the telephone.

"I'd call it more than luck—"

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Molly had answered the phone, and it was she who called out to them. "Sorry, Fletcher. It's Connie, at the office."

He shook his head sadly. "There's not supposed to be any crime on Labor Day."

Leopold gave him a smile. "That's what I used to say."

Connie Trent was on duty that day so Fletcher knew it had to be business. "Captain, I'm sorry to bother you on a holiday, but we have a missing-person situation here. It could develop into something more than that."

"What's so special about a missing person?"

"The woman who filed the report is Lynn Falkner. Remember her?"

Indeed he did. About six months earlier she and her husband had been involved in a very public tussle at one of the city's fancier restaurants. She'd jabbed him in the neck with a salad fork and drawn a few drops of blood. The police had taken her into custody, but her husband refused to press charges and she was released after a few hours. Because of the very public nature of the brawl, it had been the lead item on the eleven o'clock news that night and had made page one of the following morning's paper. Falkner was a local Realtor who dabbled in politics, and his name was fairly well known in the city.

"I remember," Fletcher said. "So her husband's gone missing? Maybe he just decided he was tired of getting jabbed with salad forks."

"It might be more than that. She called in this morning to tell us he'd been gone for twenty-four hours. He went off to church yesterday morning and never came home. Within the last hour we've had a report of a car found in that gravel pit near the old rail yard. It's Stanley Falkner's car and there's a body inside."

Fletcher sighed and glanced at his watch. It was just after one. They wouldn't be eating till two. "Call me back when you have a positive ID on the body, Connie. If it's Falkner I'll come right in."

As it turned out, Fletcher only arrived at the morgue later that night, just before Lynn Falkner was brought in to identify her husband's body. Fletcher remembered her from the trouble six months earlier, a tall attractive woman with brown hair and tinted eyeglasses. She was thirty-one years old, about the age of Fletcher's own daughter, and had been married to Stanley Falkner for eight years. It had been the first marriage for both of them. She did not seem the sort to murder her husband, but then she hadn't seemed the sort to jab him in the neck with a salad fork, either. Seated across his office desk from her after the identification, Fletcher couldn't have said exactly what sort she was.

"Now then, Mrs. Falkner, can you tell me everything that hap-

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pened yesterday morning, the last time you saw your husband alive?"

She was clutching a handkerchief in one hand but her eyes seemed dry. "Stan was brought up Catholic, but he's never gone to church regularly. I don't know what impelled him to go yesterday, unless it was the fact that my sister and her husband were visiting for the holiday weekend. I assumed he just wanted a break."

"What are their names?"

"My sister is Joan Reagen. Her husband is Doug. We were having a brunch for them and we'd invited our friends Max and Marci McGuire over at eleven. He should have been home from church by that time, but I didn't think too much of it at first."

Fletcher had a memory for names and he immediately flipped through the file on the table in front of him. "The McGuires—aren't they the couple who were with you at Leonardo's restaurant the night you and your husband had that altercation?"

She nodded. "They're our closest friends. They've stuck with us through everything."

"Your husband never returned home after church?"

"No. I thought he was picking up some last-minute things from the store, and then I thought he'd gone into one of his unpleasant moods because of my sister and brother-in-law being there."

"How long were they staying?"

Lynn Falkner brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "They were supposed to go back tonight, to get the kids ready for school, but when the police found Stan's body they said they'd stay on with me."

"You and your husband have no children?"

"No. Early in our marriage we wanted them, but lately things have been so . . ." She left the sentence dangling.

Fletcher cleared his throat. "Mrs. Falkner, that altercation at Leonardo's restaurant involved a violent assault on your husband."

"No charges were filed against me," she answered calmly, not waiting for his question. "It was a family quarrel that got out of hand."

"Was there any time when you were alone after your husband left the house to attend church?"

"Are you asking me if I have an alibi, Captain?"

"I'm just trying to narrow the possibilities, ma'am."

"Max and Marci remained at the house with us until late afternoon. I think we were all surprised that Stan didn't come home after church. And of course Joan and her husband were there overnight. I was never out of their sight. Max phoned first thing this morning to see if Stan was back, and then he and Marci came over. They're the ones who convinced me I should call the police.

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My sister thought he'd just gone off and gotten drunk somewhere because she was in town."

"I gather there was no love lost between them."

"Hardly. When we had that trouble last March she hopped the next plane here and really lit into him, told him if he filed charges against me she'd finish the job I'd started with that salad fork."

Fletcher made a few notes and then said, "You're showing remarkable control, Mrs. Falkner, in view of the fact that your husband has just been murdered."

"There was no love lost between us."

"Then why didn't you divorce him?"

"He said his religion prevented it. I know a lot of Catholics get divorces or annulments these days, but Stan's mother would have disowned him. She's very strict on the subject."

"Did your husband have any enemies?" he asked.

"No one except me."

Fletcher asked some further questions, mainly routine, then said, "That's all for now, Mrs. Falkner. I'll probably need to talk with you again in a day or two."

After she'd gone, he sat alone at his desk for a few minutes. She'd certainly shed no tears at her husband's death, but did that mean she'd killed him?

Lieutenant Connie Trent had been busy checking the movements of Lynn Falkner and her guests on that Sunday and Monday. A young neighborhood college student named Gabe Smith had been there on Sunday afternoon to cut the grass, and he verified that Lynn Falkner and her four guests had spent much of the time on the deck at the rear of the house. He hadn't noticed any of them leave, and even after he'd moved on to the yards down the street he could see that all the cars except Stanley's remained in the Falkner driveway. A neighbor across the way confirmed his account.

Fletcher read Connie's report on Tuesday afternoon and summoned her to his office. "If it's any help, they've completed the autopsy on Stanley Falkner. He died sometime Sunday but they can't pinpoint it any better than that."

"Cause of death?" Connie asked.

"His skull had been fractured by a blow from behind. He was already dead when the car was pushed over the edge of the quarry."

"Do we have any evidence that he died in the car?"

Fletcher shrugged. "There's not much blood. Looks like he was killed outside the car, possibly at the quarry since some bloodstains were found near the edge. Then he was put back in and the car went over the edge."

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"On Sunday morning?"

"It's a pretty good assumption." He showed her a time line he'd worked out. "According to the witnesses, Falkner left the house around nine forty-five, saying he was going to church. We haven't found anyone who saw him there, but then he wasn't a frequent churchgoer and a lot of people were away for the holiday weekend. He may have gone and not been recognized, or he may have had another destination in mind."

"Such as?"

"Meeting his killer."

Connie considered the possibilities. "His wife seems to have the strongest motive."

"And the strongest alibi." He stood up. "Mrs. Falkner's sister Joan is still in town till after the funeral. I think I'll run out to the house in the morning and talk to her."

Wednesday had turned gloomy with the threat of rain, and the morning streets were crowded with school buses on this first day back to class. When Fletcher reached the Falkner house it seemed deserted and for a moment he thought no one was at home. Then a middle-aged man with a neatly trimmed red beard appeared at the door.

"I'm Captain Fletcher, sir, in charge of the investigation into Stanley Falkner's death."

The bearded man held out his hand. "Doug Reagen, Lynn's brother-in-law. Come on in."

Fletcher entered the comfortable living room, noting a few current magazines on the coffee table with a cellular phone resting on them. "I was hoping to speak with your wife."

"She and Lynn are making the funeral arrangements. The medical examiner just released the body. They should be back soon. Can I get you a beer?"

"I'm on duty," Fletcher said. "But maybe you can answer a couple of questions. Just how bad were things between Lynn Falkner and her husband?"

"Oh, you'd have to ask her. I don't know anything about that."

"This is a murder investigation, Mr. Reagen," Fletcher reminded him.

He measured his reply carefully. "Husbands and wives always have their little skirmishes. It's part of being married."

"Were you and your wife here in the house for the entire day on Sunday?"

"I certainly was. Joan might have gone out at some point to get a dozen eggs. We weren't sure the McGuires were joining us until that morning."

"Was this before or after Lynn's husband left for church?"

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Doug Reagen snickered slightly. "Church? Yeah, I guess it was after."

"What's so funny, Mr. Reagen? He didn't go to church, did he?"

"Maybe he did, I don't know."

"The truth might help us find his killer."

Reagen was silent for a moment and then replied, "I suppose so. I don't know where he was going, but he told me he'd bring back a little pot for us to smoke later in the day."

"Had he done this before?"

"Not when I was around, but he and Lynn talked about it sometimes."

"What did your wife think about it?"

"Joan never criticizes her sister, no matter what."

As if on cue, the side door opened and Lynn Falkner came up the steps from the driveway, followed by a dark-haired woman who might have been a few years older. "We were at the funeral parlor," she told Fletcher by way of explanation. "This is my sister, Joan. I see you've met her husband."

"Captain Fletcher," he said, extending a hand to Joan Reagen. "I wanted to speak with you as part of our investigation. If you'd feel more comfortable at my office downtown—"

"This is fine," Joan Reagen replied. "I won't be saying anything Lynn shouldn't hear."

Fletcher ran over his timetable again, then asked, "Is it true that you went out Sunday morning to buy an extra carton of eggs?"

"I asked her to," Lynn interrupted. "When the McGuires phoned to say they were coming I discovered I was short."

"And your husband couldn't pick them up after church because—?"

"Because he was already gone."

"You could have called him on that cell phone," Fletcher observed.

Lynn Falkner shook her head. "That's mine. He didn't have one in his car."

Fletcher wanted to question Joan Reagen about the pot smoking but he knew she would say nothing that might harm her sister. Instead he asked, "How long did it take you to get the eggs?"

Joan shrugged. "Twenty, thirty minutes, I suppose. The nearest stores were closed for the Labor Day weekend, and Max and Marci were already here by the time I got back."

"How long did they stay?"

"Most of the afternoon. They were waiting for Stan to get back. They got really concerned about it, wanted to call the police right away until I convinced them to wait until Monday morning."

Later Fletcher tried to compartmentalize the five people who'd

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been at the Falkner house on the day Lynn's husband was killed. It was a technique he'd learned from Leopold and it certainly had worked well for him. If everyone was telling the truth, Lynn Falkner had been at the house all day, as had her brother-in-law, Doug. Her sister Joan had gone off for eggs and been away about a half-hour. Could she have connected with Falkner, killed him, and driven the body to the quarry in that length of time? It was doubtful, but possible.

And what about Max and Marci McGuire? Might they have killed their close friend Stan before arriving at his house for Sunday brunch? That seemed unlikely, but he knew he had to question them next.

The McGuires lived in a modern town house down by the Sound, one that had been built a few years back on the grounds of a country club. Connie had told him that Max McGuire was a teacher while his wife did book keeping part time on her home computer. Fletcher wasn't surprised to see two sets of golf clubs in the open garage next to a sporty new car.

It was Marci McGuire who answered his ring, wearing shorts and a country club T-shirt. After studying his identification, she said, "I'd rather you came back when my husband is home. He's out golfing right now. He only had a half-day at the high school."

Fletcher gave her an innocent smile. "Oh? I thought I saw his clubs in the garage."

That unhinged her nicely. "I—perhaps he returned when I was in the basement. Let me look upstairs." She left the door ajar and Fletcher edged his way through.

She came back in a moment with her husband close behind her. Both had the look of blond, tanned athletes, and his shorts and shirt matched hers. "We've already given our stories to your Lieutenant Trent," the man told Fletcher. "I don't know what more we can add." They all sat down around a coffee table that had a layout of the club's golf course on its surface.

"Excuse me if I run over the same material again. I need to verify the time you both arrived at the Falkner home on Sunday."

"A bit after eleven, wasn't it, Marci?"

She agreed. "Maybe quarter past, at the latest."

"They were all there when you arrived?"

"Well, no," Marci replied. "Lynn said Stan had gone to church, though that seemed unlikely. As you know, he never did come back."

"And Joan was out buying eggs or something," her husband added. "She came in just after we got there."

"Were there any other visitors during the day?"

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"Not unless you count the college kid who cuts their grass. He came by in the afternoon."

"Did Falkner have any enemies you knew about? Did he ever mention threats to his life?"

"Sure, his wife told him she wished he was dead," Max McGuire said. "We were there when she tried to kill him with a fork, just because he made fun of the dress she was wearing."

"They passed that off as a family spat. He declined to bring charges against her."

"He'd have brought charges if it had happened now," Marci told him.

"How come? What changed?"

They exchanged glances and Fletcher knew they had more to tell. Finally Marci said, "Lynn has a lover. She's been having an affair for four months and Stan found out about it. He was looking for some keys in her purse and discovered a letter she was apparently going to mail. I think that was the last straw. He came here one night last week and showed us the letter."

"What did it say?"

Another exchange of glances. Finally Max McGuire stood up. "We have it. He gave it to us for safekeeping." He left the room to get it.

"In case anything happened to him," Marci added.

"He thought she was going to kill him?"

"She attacked him at least twice that we know about, once at the restaurant and once with her car."

"When was that?" Fletcher asked, making notes as fast as he could.

"Back in June. He was on foot, behind the car, and she backed right into him, claimed she didn't see him."

"Was he hurt?"

Marci shook her head. "I guess just a few bruises. He didn't report it."

Her husband returned with a folded sheet of notepaper inside a blank envelope. "He said he took this out of her purse."

Fletcher handled it carefully, at the edges, in case there was a possibility of fingerprints. The note was dated August 29 and read: *Angel, These past four months have been heaven. My nights without you are a sham. I must get rid of him before he drives me crazy. This time I'll make certain we succeed. Loving you in every dream. Your Lynn.*

"Do you have any idea who this Angel might be?" Fletcher asked, slipping the note back in its envelope.

"None," Max McGuire replied. "And neither did Stan. But she must have realized he'd found the note and taken it."

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His wife shook her head, seeming close to tears. "They were our best friends once. We couldn't believe such a thing would happen."

"I'll have to keep this," Fletcher said, carefully storing the envelope between the pages of his notebook. He'd transfer it to a plastic evidence bag in the car. "Just one more question for now. Did Lynn Falkner and her husband ever smoke pot or use other drugs?"

"Once, I think. Maybe twice. It wasn't a regular thing, at least not when we were around," Marci said. Her husband nodded in agreement.

"When Stan Falkner said he was going to church Sunday, might he actually have been going to buy some drugs?"

Neither of them knew the answer to that question. Perhaps only Lynn Falkner had all the answers.

"Where do we stand?" Connie Trent asked him on Thursday morning. Calling hours were planned at the funeral parlor that evening, and Stan Falkner's funeral mass would be celebrated on Friday at the church he may or may not have attended the previous Sunday.

"We checked the fingerprints on that note," Fletcher told her. "I requested sample prints from Lynn Falkner, the McGuires, and the Reagens. As we expected, Lynn, her husband, and the McGuires all left prints on it. How about you?"

"I've got the lab report on the victim's clothing, but there's nothing unusual—bits of gravel in the bottom of his sneakers, some blades of grass on his pants, a dab of blue paint on his shirt which may or may not have been there earlier."

"That gravel interests me," Fletcher said. "It confirms he was out of the car at the gravel pit, as we already suspected from that blood on the ground."

Connie nodded. "It matches the gravel around the pit."

"He went there to meet someone."

"Are you back to a drug deal again?"

"I don't know. There may be another explanation that gets us back to Lynn Falkner or her lover. I want to question her again. Today, before the wake. I want to confront her with this letter."

"Can't it wait till after the funeral?"

"I think it has to be today," Fletcher said.

Lynn Falkner arrived at his office just before noon, looking distraught. "What's so important that it can't wait?" she demanded. "You said something about new evidence turning up."

"Please have a seat, Mrs. Falkner. I hope this won't take long." He pushed a pad and pencil across the desk to her. "We're going to need a sample of your handwriting."

"What for?"

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He ignored her question. "Please write these words: *Angel, These past four months have been heaven—*"

She put down the pencil and said, very quietly, "I want a lawyer."

"I was about to advise you of your rights." He took out a photocopy of the letter and showed it to her. "Do you deny writing this?"

"Where did you get it?"

"Who is Angel?" he countered. "Were you having a love affair with him?"

Silence.

"Did he lure Stan out to the gravel pit and kill him for you?"

"I think it's time for a lawyer," she said.

"Very well. I'll give you a few minutes to think it over and then you can call someone."

He went over to Connie's desk in the squad room, watching Lynn Falkner through the glass partition to his office. "I showed her the note and she wants a lawyer."

"Are you going to arrest her?"

"I need a lot more than that note. But I think I've unnerved her."

He gave it five more minutes, pouring himself a cup of coffee, and then returned to his office. Lynn Falkner glanced up as he entered. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked.

"No, thank you." She moistened her lips. "I've decided to make a statement."

"Without a lawyer? Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I am. What's the use of dragging it out?"

"All right." He took the familiar printed card from his desk drawer. "I'll get Lieutenant Trent in here to record us while I read you your rights. Then we'll run through some questions and put it all in statement form for your signature."

"Fine." She smiled faintly. "You'll have to guide me. I've never confessed to a murder before."

Connie came in to join them and turned on a tape recorder. Fletcher read the statement of Lynn Falkner's rights from the card and then asked, "Mrs. Falkner, do you have any knowledge of the manner in which your husband died last Sunday?"

"Yes, he was killed by my lover, Gavin Stark, at my urging."

"How long has this Gavin Stark been your lover?"

"About four months. We met one day while shopping at the supermarket."

"What's his address?"

"He's divorced and has a furnished apartment on Maple Street. I'll give you the number."

"Suppose you tell us exactly what happened on Sunday."

She took a deep breath and began. "Stan and I had been bitter

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enemies for a year or longer. Sometimes he tried to beat or humiliate me and I struck back with whatever weapon was at hand. It wasn't always as public as that night at the restaurant. He wouldn't give me a divorce because of his religion, and I was thinking about killing him even before I met Gavin. During the summer I tried hitting him with the car but I botched it. When I told Gavin about that, he said that he would kill him."

"How did he go about it?"

"Stan occasionally bought small quantities of marijuana for us to smoke. He thought we fought less if we were a little high. Gavin struck up a conversation with him in a bar one night and mentioned that he could supply high-grade pot at a good price. He gave him a little just to try. Then he was going to lure him out to the gravel pit and kill him there. It was supposed to be later in September, but I moved it up to last Sunday when I discovered that Stan had found the note in my purse."

"What did Gavin Stark kill him with?"

"A jack handle, I think. I didn't ask the details. After Stan was dead he lifted him back into the car and rolled it into the gravel pit. He figured it might be a few days before it was found, but somebody spotted it on Monday."

"Have you talked to him since then?"

"He called Sunday noon to say it was done. I pretended it was a wrong number."

"You called him Angel. Why was that?"

She smiled sadly at the memory. "Because he looks like one. And he said his name, Gavin, is an Old Welsh word for hawk. I thought of calling him Hawk, but Angel seemed more appropriate."

Fletcher passed the address over to Connie. "Go pick him up, Lieutenant. Take a couple of men with you."

But Gavin Stark wasn't there. By the time Fletcher had a statement typed up for Lynn Falkner to sign, Connie had radioed in that the apartment seemed empty. "Get a search warrant," he told her.

"The landlord's never seen him, Captain," she said. "He just gets a rent check in the mail every month."

"Get a search warrant," he repeated.

Connie did so and returned to the squad room a few hours later. "There were a few clothes and toilet articles, a bottle of Scotch with two glasses, some condoms, and a few joints of pot. It looks more like a love nest than someone's living quarters."

He could tell she was holding something back. "What else, Connie?"

"Beneath a pile of his monogrammed handkerchiefs I found two more letters from Lynn to Angel."

"Is his name and address on the envelopes?"

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"The envelopes are blank. She must have hand-delivered them."

"Let's see them."

The letters were much like the one he had, perhaps a bit more passionate but both addressed to "Angel" or "Dearest Angel." He read them over a couple of times, then returned the plastic evidence bags to Connie. "His fingerprints should be all over these. Have them tested right away."

"The landlord has the name of the bank the rent checks were drawn on. We can go after the account, too."

"Good idea," he agreed. "Keep me informed."

He went back into his office. Lynn Falkner had been formally arrested and charged with murder and conspiracy to commit murder. He said she could attend her husband's funeral service with Connie Trent escorting her, but she declined. Her arrest was a page-one story the following morning and the story stated that an unnamed accomplice was being sought. Two weeks later, Lynn was indicted by a grand jury and she hired the city's top criminal lawyer to defend her. The trial was set to begin the first week in January.

Autumn dragged on, and still there was no sign of Gavin Stark. In fact, except for the bank account used to pay rent on the apartment, there was no firm evidence that he'd ever existed. The love letters from Lynn Falkner in his drawer had been wiped clean of fingerprints, as had everything else in the small apartment.

Connie had questioned everyone at the bank branch where the checking account had been opened, but no one remembered ever seeing Stark. The customer service representative whose name was on the account record thought it might have been a woman who opened it. She told Connie she vaguely remembered the woman depositing five thousand dollars in cash. Connie showed her the mug shot of Lynn Falkner. The bank representative thought it looked a bit like her, but she couldn't be certain.

Two days before Thanksgiving, with the whereabouts of Gavin Stark still a mystery, Lynn Falkner's attorney, Clark Whitehead, announced that she had recanted her confession, claiming it was obtained under duress on the very day of her husband's wake.

Thanksgiving dinner with Leopold and Molly was always a pleasure. Some years, when Fletcher and Carol's children came home, the Leopolds prepared dinner for everyone. This year there were only the four of them, and Molly insisted on roasting the turkey. While Carol helped her in the kitchen, Fletcher joined Leopold on the enclosed back porch for a glass of white wine. It had been a good autumn, with sunny days and crisp nights, and a few browning oak leaves still clung to the tree in Leopold's backyard.

The first thing he asked Fletcher was, "Any luck finding the Falkner woman's accomplice yet?"

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"Lots of luck, all of it bad. I'll swear the man is a phantom."

Leopold smiled. "A phantom lover. I suppose there've been stranger things."

"I know she's conning us somehow, but I don't know how or why."

"The *why* part is simple enough. If the jury finds her not guilty she can't be tried again, and without the lover I don't believe the D.A.'s office has enough evidence for a guilty verdict."

"What do you mean?"

"Lynn Falkner has been indicted on two counts, second-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder. She has a solid alibi for the time her husband was killed."

"We just have her brother-in-law's word for that. Maybe they're in it together. Maybe he's the phantom lover."

Leopold shook his head. "I've been following this case closely in the papers. Even if they were in it together, there wasn't enough time. They'd hardly try something like that with her sister Joan due to return with the eggs, and the McGuires on their way over."

"Do you believe those letters from Lynn Falkner to Angel are genuine?"

"Probably. But you should keep in mind that Angel might not be a male. It's a much more common term of endearment for a woman."

Fletcher grunted, considering the possibilities. "All right, admitting for the moment that she has an alibi, what about the second count of the indictment?"

"Conspiracy to commit murder? Who did she conspire with?"

"Gavin Stark."

Leopold shook his head sadly. "A phantom lover. If you cannot produce this Gavin Stark, there is no way the D.A. can prove a conspiracy. For all we know, the man never existed."

"But—"

"As things stand today, with her confession recanted, the alibi firmly in place, and no sign of the supposed accomplice, I doubt if there's a jury in the country that would convict her. Come January she'll be acquitted and she'll be home free."

Fletcher got up to pour himself another glass of wine. "Tell me one thing, Captain."

"You're the captain now," Leopold corrected.

"Tell me one thing. Do you think she did it?"

"Of course she did it! Now you just have to find her accomplice."

Because he'd been at the cottage on Labor Day and Connie Trent had handled the preliminary investigation, Fletcher had never actually visited the scene of the crime. By the time he'd arrived downtown on that holiday evening the body was at the morgue and the wrecked car had been towed into the police garage. He'd

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studied maybe a hundred color photographs of the body and the crime scene, but that wasn't the same as going there yourself. On the Saturday after Thanksgiving he drove out to the quarry to get a feel of the place.

It was a barren, desolate location, without even a blade of grass growing anywhere near. A dusty dirt road ran all along the rim of the place, dipping at one point to start its perilous journey to the quarry's bottom. On this holiday weekend some machinery remained in place, unused, against the far wall of stone, ready to start cutting again on Monday morning. The leaden sky and chill air made it even more unattractive than it would have been on Labor Day. Certainly on a deserted holiday weekend it would be the perfect setting for a drug purchase. Or a murder.

From the crime-scene photos Fletcher could identify the spot where the car had gone over the edge with Falkner's body inside. There was gravel here, no doubt spilled from the endless caravan of trucks that used this service road. Connie had told him it matched the gravel embedded in the bottom of the victim's sneakers.

He thought about it on the drive back to headquarters. There was something he was missing, some vital point he'd overlooked. He was sure Leopold would have had the case solved by now.

On Monday morning he met with District Attorney Webber at the Hall of Justice. He never liked these occasional sessions with Webber, who was quick to pass out blame but rather slow when it came to congratulations for a job well done. He was gray-haired and overweight, and had a reputation for trying cases only when they were cut-and-dried high-profile ones likely to help his reelection chances.

"Captain Fletcher," he began, "the trial of Lynn Falkner is scheduled to begin five weeks from today. What's the story on this recanted confession?"

Fletcher told him everything he knew, describing the interview during which the confession was obtained. "I stand behind it one hundred percent. There was no intimidation of any sort. I believe that confession to be true."

"Then why haven't you been able to locate this man Gavin Stark? We're nowhere without him."

"He seems to have dropped off the face of the earth. The rent was paid by checks drawn on a bank account used only for that purpose. We found no fingerprints in the apartment even though it seems to have been used as a love nest."

Webber sighed. "We need him, Captain Fletcher. Without him, I may have to ask for a postponement, which might not be granted."

"We'll find him for you," Fletcher said with more confidence than he felt.

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Later that same week, as the season's first snowfall dusted the December streets, Fletcher spoke again with Lynn Falkner, this time in the interview room at the county jail. Her lawyer, Clark Whitehead, sat beside her, and it was clear that she had no intention of changing her story another time. "You forced that confession out of me!" she insisted angrily. "It was the day of Stan's wake and I didn't know what I was saying."

"You assaulted him six months earlier," Fletcher reminded her.

"With a salad fork," her lawyer said with a dismissive wave of his hand. Fletcher could see him using the same gesture in front of a jury.

"Gavin Stark exists," he insisted. "He had some clothing in the apartment you told us about, along with more of your letters."

"Then where is he?" Whitehead demanded. "The contents of that apartment prove nothing, apart from the letters, which could have been planted."

And of course he was right.

Fletcher's frustration grew with each passing day. He found himself taking it out on Carol at home, and hated what the case was doing to him. "Why don't you call Leopold?" she said finally.

"You don't think I can handle this on my own? Leopold's retired twice from the department already. I can't keep dragging him back."

"Call him," she begged.

Molly answered the phone and put Leopold on at once. "I hate to bother you again with this Falkner case, but Webber's breathing down my neck."

"I saw the headline in the morning paper," Leopold said. "*Webber and Whitehead to Face Off in Falkner Trial.*"

"The D.A. is afraid of losing this one. He wants us to find Gavin Stark."

"Are you any closer to that?"

"Not an inch," Fletcher admitted. "No car registration in the state, no other bank accounts, nothing."

"It's obviously an alias."

"Connie has checked the alias file for known criminals and come up with nothing."

"Any other thoughts?"

"Just a wild one. Do you think all five of those people—Lynn, the Reagens, and the McGuires—could be in it together?"

He could hear Leopold sigh into the receiver. "Fletcher, you're making this too complicated. It's not. It's a simple case of a woman and her lover killing her husband."

"What should I do?" Fletcher asked quietly.

"Think about it."

Fletcher did just that, through most of December. Christmas

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shopping reached its peak, kids came home from college, and even in the squad room holiday decorations began to appear. He thought about all this, and considered some dates. By late August, according to Lynn Falkner's love note to Angel, the affair had been going on for four months.

Late April, maybe early May.

What happened at that time of year, every year?

"Connie!" he called out to the squad room.

"What is it, Captain?"

"What was the name of that college kid you questioned, the one who cut the Falkners' grass?"

She flipped open her file and replied after a moment. "Gabe Smith. Why?"

"Give me his address and get your coat."

"He's probably gone back to school."

"It's Christmas recess for most colleges."

The Smiths lived in a brick and stone house about two blocks from the Falkners. It was Mrs. Smith, a pale, slender woman, who answered the door. She studied Fletcher's identification and said, "Gabe is out with his friends. He should be home soon for dinner."

Fletcher went out to his unmarked car to wait. Connie was in her car, two blocks farther down the street. It was just under an hour, as the day was getting darker, when a car driven by a sandy-haired young man pulled up in front of the Smith house. Fletcher reached out the window and clamped his spinning red light to the roof of the car as he pulled up behind him.

That was when Smith caught him off guard. Instead of getting out, he threw the car into reverse and slammed backwards into Fletcher's car, setting off the airbag. It hit Fletcher in the face and chest with the force of a boxing glove. He was out of the car the instant it deflated, but Smith was already accelerating forward down the street.

He reached for the radio and barked, "He's headed your way in a red Saturn. Take him, Connie. He's our killer."

It was Leopold himself who answered the door the following evening, after dinner. He smiled at Fletcher but couldn't resist a little dig. "The old airbag trick, and you fell for it!"

"I never heard of it before," Fletcher grumbled.

"You haven't been reading the national crime reports."

But Molly came to his rescue with a couple of beers. "Don't let him bug you, Fletcher. He thinks you did a fine job, even if he won't admit it."

Fletcher accepted one of the beers and sat down. "Connie's the one who did the fine job. She had him out of the car and handcuffed before he knew what hit him."

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"So tell me how it went down," Leopold asked, with a boyish eagerness for the details. "How did you know this Gabe Smith was the so-called phantom lover?"

"Her note spoke of four months of heaven. I thought back to early May and tried to remember what might have happened then. Two things came to mind. Some colleges end their classes around that time, and the grass begins to grow. I remembered Connie and someone else—Max McGuire, I think—mentioning a college kid who cut the Falkners' lawn on Sunday afternoon. He cut several lawns in the neighborhood, some probably on Sunday morning. I remembered there were traces of grass on Falkner's clothes, yet no grass grew near the quarry where he'd been killed. The grass had come from the killer's clothes when he lifted the body back into the car. Grass, and a young man who cut it."

"Keep going," Leopold said.

"The note Falkner found in his wife's purse, and those we found in the apartment, were in blank envelopes without address or postage. They hadn't been sent through the mail but delivered personally from Lynn Falkner to her lover. I wondered why that was necessary. If they met, she could simply tell him her feelings. But with her husband often at home it was necessary to slip these notes to Gabe Smith, probably when she paid him each time for cutting the grass. She rented an apartment where they could meet, setting up a bank account for the purpose in the fictitious name of Gavin Stark. Notice that the initials were the same—Gavin Stark and Gabe Smith. They could leave those monogrammed handkerchiefs in the room without any danger. They were a little gift from her, I suppose."

"She must be ten years older than he is," Molly commented from the doorway.

Fletcher shrugged. "That's nothing new."

"How did Smith lure Falkner to the scene?" Leopold asked.

"It was as we suspected. He struck up a conversation with him in the yard one day and offered to supply Falkner with small amounts of pot. That's what Falkner was after when he said he was going to church. Then, after killing Falkner, Smith phoned Lynn on her cell phone as a signal that it was done. He used a pay phone or we'd have been onto him earlier."

"What about the notes addressed to Angel?" Molly asked. "Was that just a term of endearment?"

"Not entirely," Fletcher answered. "Gabe is short for Gabriel, of course, and we all remember that Biblical archangel, don't we?"

Leopold smiled and asked for another beer. ●

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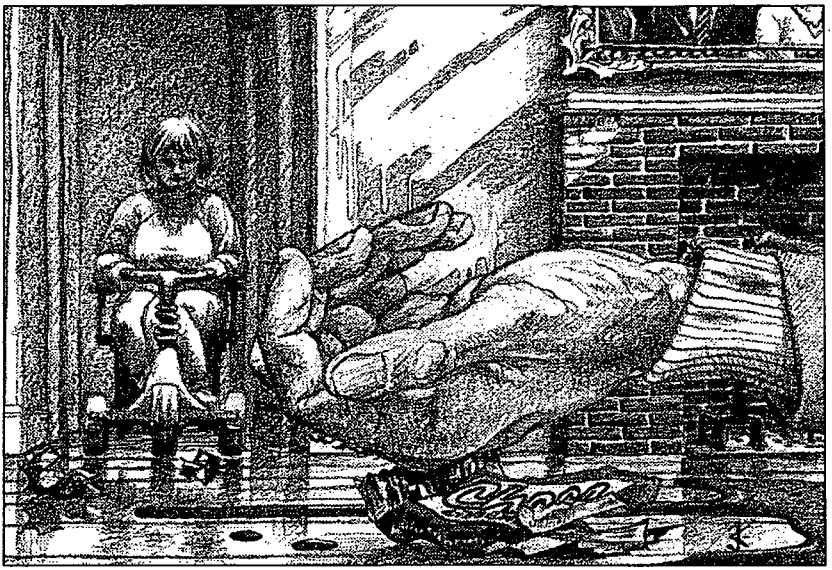

Art by Jason Eckhardt

But the Corpse Can't Laugh

by Mary Jane Maffini

I remembered biting the ears off a pair of white chocolate Easter bunnies somewhere around three A.M. Then nothing. Morning found me with a deep thirst, a throb over my left temple, and a serious dip in my serotonin levels. Plus I felt hot, damp, and sticky, trapped in a sweaty twist of sheets.

I opened one eye just a slit.

Was Harlan around? No. My brother could never resist flicking the two-hundred-watt overhead lights on and off a few times when he crawled home. I had no recollection of snapping awake to a blinding flash of light, therefore Harlan was still out.

I desperately needed a hair of the dog and since dawn is never Harlan's sprightliest time, it was probably safe to go to the bathroom.

I managed to launch myself into my Dynamo scooter and turn

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the key. I held the left handlebar. I needed my right hand to keep my head from falling off. An empty Laura Secord box crunched as the front wheel crushed it.

I stuck my nose in Harlan's room. His bed was still tight as a fresh face lift. For sure he hadn't come home last night. Unless he'd made it to throw me off, and maybe he'd be crouched behind the shower curtain waiting to spring out wearing his clip-on fangs.

Ha ha, Harlan.

Bad luck in the bathroom. Harlan must have found my stash again. No problemo. That's why I keep a secret stockpile of Toblerone in the pantry. He thinks I can't reach.

A bookstore owner, newsletter editor, short-story writer, and crime novelist, Mary Jane Maffini has every corner of the publishing world covered. In 1995 she claimed Canada's most distinguished honor for mystery fiction, the Arthur Ellis Award. Her debut for *EQMM* will be closely followed by the publication of her novel *Speak Ill of the Dead* (Napoleon Publishing/RendezVous Press).

Sweat trickled between my shoulder blades. As soon as I choked down my Toblerone, I would turn on the A/C and then stick my face into the freezer side of the fridge.

I closed my eyes and motored along the fuchsia hallway. Harlan picked that color, painted over Mother's silk wallpaper, knowing it would raise my core body temperature.

I made a left into the living room, which used to be my favorite spot with its pale sand walls and sweeping view of trees, lawn, and ravine. Until Harlan purchased two gallons of Tangerine Tango semigloss and took one wild swipe at the walls, stopping over the fireplace by the edge of the oversize oil portrait of Mother and Father. A couple of orange splats speckled the gilt frame. A glob glistened on a Limoges dish.

Forget that, Harlan. I won't give in. It would take more than Tangerine Tango to drive me from my home. You can be the one to leave. If I can cope with life with these useless legs, I can cope with anything.

Harlan lay snoozing on the living room floor, his legs bent in a Fred Astaire pose. His toupee flopped a foot away, like a dead guinea pig. A Dairy Milk wrapper peeked out coyly from behind his left loafer and a lot of red gunk occupied the place where his face used to be.

Ha ha, Harlan.

I wasn't falling for that. I didn't get close enough for the supposed stiff to grab my ankle.

I said. "Very funny." *A bit of ketchup squirted on your face is not enough to get rid of me.*

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I kept rolling toward the kitchen.

Was it hot. Were those damn flashes going to start in the morning now? Wait. A. Minute. How many times would Harlan play the old thermostat trick before I caught on?

Sure enough. Set at 100 degrees. That'll do it. Harlan had repositioned the thermostat high on the dining room wall, over the china cabinet, out of reach from the Dynamo.

Ha ha, Harlan. It will take more than that today.

I tried the barbecue fork to reach the thermostat. Too short. The broom handle was long enough but too bulky to control the buttons. Finally I taped a pencil, eraser-end up, to the end of the broom handle and flicked the A/C switch.

I could count on Harlan's sense of dramatic purpose to keep him frozen in the same position until the joke was over. No point in making it easy for him. I rolled back into the living room with a bowl of Baskin-Robbins mint chocolate chip ice cream and parked. Some people chug-a-lug Prozac. Since when do synthetics compete with real chocolate?

I ate the ice cream while observing Harlan's absolute stillness and marveling at his stamina. No wonder he was so often a jump ahead of me.

Harlan had said the painter was coming at nine to finish the tangerine job.

"I'll just wait here for that painter, Harlan. Don't bother to get up."

My eye caught a peculiar metallic glint poking out under the sofa dust cover. I put down the ice cream and reached for it. Very funny. A revolver. With a strange crude metal cylinder near the top. What was that supposed to be? A homemade silencer?

Nice detail, Harlan, but you're not catching me with Krazy Glue again.

I took a good look at that gun. Brown smudges smeared the butt and the trigger. Looked like Lindt's finest.

Watching a person play dead can get tedious once your ice cream's gone, so I picked up Harlan's toupee. And his favorite lighter. The one where the bathing suit falls down. "Never kid a kidder, Harlan." Not even Harlan would stay dead while his genuine human-hair, custom-made European hairpiece went up in smoke.

The toupee caught nicely, issuing a stream of fumes and a smell you'd rather forget. I had to admire Harlan. Not a twitch.

No points to me. Much as I hated to have Harlan outcool me one more time, I hated the idea of having to peel Krispy Crunch bars with burnt fingers even more.

I tried blowing out the flames but the hairpiece was too hot to handle. "Ouch," I yelped and flung it onto the floor. The flames licked at the cuff of his stretch shirt and caught. Harlan didn't flinch. The room took on the acrid scent of burning flesh. No no

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no. I yanked up the dustcover and grabbed the silk cushions from the sofa to beat at the blaze, bumping Harlan with the Dynamo.

By the time I extinguished Harlan, it sank in. I'd always felt like killing him. Now I wouldn't have to.

I sagged back in the Dynamo and closed my eyes. I wasn't sure if the chill I felt was just shock. I could hear myself breathing, like a clogged sump pump.

Mother always said every cloud has a silver lining. Right. Someone had done me one hell of a favor.

But who should get the thank-you?

Well, the first choice would be Buddy, Harlan's business partner in The Camelot Golf and Country Club. Then Angie, his current mistress. Surely even someone of her low tastes must be getting tired of having plastic cockroaches in her bed. And what about Jack, our nearest neighbor? He'd squandered his severance package on Harlan's useless tips on the market. Who else? Harlan had been dropped by his doctor, his dentist, and his broker, all of whom had bleated about legal action. I wasn't sure how Harlan headed off all those lawsuits but the word blackmail came to mind.

Yep. The list of suspects would read like the phone book. Too bad I'd be "A."

Everyone knew Harlan was bleeding the family business. Everyone knew I was fighting to regain legal control and Harlan was scheming to get me out of our family home so he could sell it. Everyone knew we hated each other.

I felt my serotonin levels dipping dangerously. I got as far as the desk drawer and pulled out a couple of Snickers hidden in a file. My hands were starting to quiver.

Ha ha, Harlan. You're not going to get to me this time.

Maybe I could get off on a psychological-abuse defense. No shortage of people who would corroborate that. But why should I have to defend myself? Harlan was finally satisfyingly, gloriously dead and I wanted the freedom to sit back and enjoy it. I wanted to sleep without expecting ice cubes dropped into the bed. I wanted to use the toilet without finding a dock spider poised to take a jump. I wanted . . . wanted to stop trembling.

The Snickers didn't do the trick.

Think. What next? That painter was due soon. He'd call the police. Ha Ha Harlan probably wouldn't even mind being dead knowing just how much doo-doo I'd be in.

It would be better to have Harlan out of the way before the room filled with witnesses.

One good thing about Harlan, he never trusted anybody.

Correctly, as it turned out. All that paranoia could come in

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handy. That false wall in the walk-in closet in his bedroom might be just the ticket to buy me a bit of time.

Harlan had that wall built to foil the burglars he was always expecting. That's where he kept his video equipment, cameras, coins, stock certificates, you name it. Mother's jewelry was hidden too, on a shelf six feet up. I had to ask nicely if I wanted it. Harlan kept Father's stamp collection there, at least the part he hadn't sold. The temperature was right for Father's vintage port and the eighteen-year-old scotch.

God help any foolish break-in artist who swilled down anything in the decanters in the living room.

Of course, I got to stay right out in the open in a house with five doors in the middle of a dozen wooded acres, a sitting duck for burglars and now, it seemed, murderers. But the joke was on Harlan. *Ha ha.*

It wasn't easy wrapping Harlan and his toupee in a moldy old sleeping bag and rigging up a travois with the broom, the mop, and my travel clothesline. I used a towel to pick up the chocolatey weapon. I wiped it well and tucked it in his pocket. I hoped I wouldn't blow the little five-amp motor right out of the Dynamo dragging him.

The switch to open the false wall sits at the back of the fourth shelf behind Harlan's out-of-season Italian sweaters. The broomstick was still tied up in the travois so this time I attached the pencil to the yardstick. After about five longish minutes, I toggled the switch. Sure enough, the wall swung.

Ha ha, Harlan. I found a new use for your secret space.

The Dynamo does not have that much mobility and it took one hell of a long time tugging and yanking to get Harlan tucked in. It wasn't that easy with the mold from the sleeping bag irritating my nose. The stinky hairpiece didn't help either. Harlan was hard and wiry to begin with. Now he'd started to stiffen. I caught a sharp whack in the face with his left arm as I struggled.

Ho ho, too late, Harlan, I'm in charge now.

Using reverse, I managed to wedge him up against a stack of stamp catalogues, with what was left of his head resting on a black-bound collection of penny reds.

I toggled the wall closed and drove myself straight to the shower. It took half a tank of hot water, half a tube of Watermelon shower gel, and two brushings with Sensodyne to rid myself of the smell and taste.

Afterwards I drank an entire fudge milkshake to build up those endorphins. Only then could I head back to the living room and turn my attention to the brownish rabbit-shaped stain on the hardwood. I had an idea. I slapped down some newspaper and

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plunked the paint tray and the can on it.

The doorbell rang.

The painter already. I still had a bit of covering up to do. I wrestled with the first can of paint and managed to pry it open using Harlan's Swiss Army knife. The doorbell rang again before I accomplished what I wanted to.

I bet you're laughing, Harlan.

The doorbell pealed a third time and, almost immediately, again. No wonder I couldn't handle that paint can, my hands were shaking.

On the fifth ring, I gave up.

I ran my tongue over my teeth in case of fudge residue, straightened my spine, and called out, "Hold your water, I'm on my way."

Pushy painter. Now I had no choice but to send him packing until I covered Harlan's traces.

But it was not a painter.

Someone soft, squishy, and middle-aged looked down, looked startled, looked embarrassed, and looked away.

I'm used to it.

A real-estate agent? Bastard Harlan. I felt a wave of hysteria. But Harlan can't sell the house or any property if I don't want to leave. Terms of Father's will. Not that it matters now.

"Hobart residence?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" I said.

"May I come in?" His voice was like a double malted. No, rich, creamy chocolate syrup. Distracting. And what did he call himself?

"Did you say Detective Fudge?"

"Budge." He patted down a wayward cowlick.

"Oh." Too bad.

"May I come in?"

"What for?" I said.

"There's something I need to discuss with you."

I haven't lived with Ha Ha Harlan all my life without learning a few things. Question everything and everybody. This guy's rumpled gray suit was enough to make my spider senses tingle.

"How do I know you're the police, Detective Smudge?"

He blinked.

"Can I see your badge?"

"You know, I should have showed it to you." He felt around for the badge in several pockets until he fished out a plastic holder. I leaned forward and squinted at it. You'd think the police would know where their badges were.

Behind him, perhaps for added effect, a cruiser edged into the driveway. A uniformed officer ejected and marched crisply toward the house. If knife-edged creases were a clue, this man knew where his badge was. But maybe the joker who pulled the fast one

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on Harlan still wanted to play. You had to be pretty sharp to get the drop on Harlan.

"Constable Cuddihy," he said, like he had something to celebrate.

"I'll check with the station," I said, closing the door in their faces.

"Sorry," I said, opening it two minutes later. "Living out here, I never take anything on face value."

Mr. Smooth and Fudgy nodded. "You know, I don't blame you."

Mr. Confidence and Creases said, "Can't be too careful these days." Up close, he had deep circles under his eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to cut.

They followed me into the living room, awkwardly, probably unsettled by the scooter.

"Have a seat," I said, keeping my voice cheerful. "Don't mind the dust covers. We're decorating."

They sat. I parked the Dynamo on the newspaper.

A heavy dose of Spring Bouquet room freshener masked the burnt smell. Just to be on the safe side, I picked up one of Harlan's cigarettes and lit it.

"So, what can I do for you?" I asked, trying not to gag on the smoke. I deposited the cigarette in the ashtray and let it work on its own.

"Hmm?" Detective Budge seemed distracted by the spectacular slash of orange on the wall.

"Like it?" I said. "My brother prefers an invigorating decor." Invigorating, yes, roughly like sticking your tongue into an electrical socket. The look they gave me was worth it.

"So?" I said encouragingly. I leaned forward, flipped up the lid, tipped the paint can, and poured some into the paint tray.

Detective Budge recovered himself. "Sorry to bother you so early in the morning but . . ."

"Been up for ages, trying to get ready for the painter, which my brother was supposed to do," I said. "But how rude of me. It *is* early. Could I offer you a cup of hot chocolate?"

"Perhaps later," Detective Budge said. "We received a call someone had been shot here."

I laughed. "You're kidding."

Detective Budge's eyes widened. A couple of new cowlicks sprang up.

Constable Cuddihy's bony jaw stiffened. "Killed," he said.

Oops. Laughter. Inappropriate response.

"Does it look like someone's been killed here?" I tried to recoup a little dignity.

The detective gave a diffident little shrug followed by a sheepish grin. "We have to follow up on these things."

"Of course," I said, "but who . . . ?"

"Anonymous."

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"Well, naturally. But who's supposed to be dead?"

They both stared at their feet. I tried to look intrigued. Finally, Detective Budge stood up and shuffled toward me. This time, he looked me straight in the eye.

"Your brother."

I shrieked and lurched forward, strategically maneuvering the Dynamo to hit the paint tray. Orange paint splashed everywhere, saturating the newspaper. "Harlan's dead?"

Detective Budge edged closer, risking a clot of orange on his suit. It was a pretty bad suit, but even so. The man obviously had heart.

I moaned, "He didn't come home last night."

"You didn't call the police when he didn't come home?"

"For Harlan?" I gasped. "You must be kidding."

"Pardon me?"

"He often stays out."

"He does? This is a pretty remote location, you know. You mean he leaves you alone and doesn't . . ."

He does more than that, fudge-man. He moves the phones out of my reach, and turns off the electricity at the main switch, and . . .

"Wait a minute." I started hyperventilating, easy if I'm thinking about my little hell with Harlan. "What's the matter with me? It's just another joke. Ha ha!"

"Cuddihy, get a paper bag from the kitchen," Detective Budge said. "Make it snappy."

The constable clicked his heels.

"No no no," I warbled between long vibrato breaths. "That Harlan. He's pulling your leg. Gosh, I got such a fright, I think I'm going to faint."

I had my head between my legs and a great view of a bloodstain on my Phentex slipper when Constable Cuddihy goose-stepped back with a paper bag. "It's okay," I hiccuped. "Harlan scares the daylights out of me a couple of times a day."

Don't let them see that slipper.

The detective stroked my shoulder. What a light gentle touch! Cloudlike as an Aero bar.

I sat up and waved away the bag.

Detective Budge cleared his throat. "You know, we'll have to take a look around."

"Of course. Forgive me. Go ahead. Make sure you check behind the shower curtains."

They were still exchanging glances as they left the room.

I called after them, "Don't get too close to the beds. He likes to grab ankles. Made one of my friends pee on the floor once."

Detective Budge lurched back into the room, tiptoeing to avoid the tangerine puddles.

"Can I call someone for you? You seem . . ."

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Hysterical? Well, yes, that's the idea. "No, no one. Not a soul." I didn't have a single friend who'd been willing to set foot in Harlan's house for years.

"You know, I think . . ."

"Really, I'm fine. I'll just sit and wait for the painter. Gosh, I'll have to call someone to refinish the hardwood now."

As soon as they were out of sight, I grabbed the slipper with the bloodstain and dipped it into the nearest blob of Tangerine Tango.

All in all, I thought, that hadn't gone too badly.

"Constable Cuddihy's finished checking the grounds. Sorry to have bothered you," the detective said smoothly and fudgily.

"Don't worry about it." My voice was steady. Living with Harlan, you learn to keep your reactions secret. "I imagine you have no choice but to follow up on these things."

"Well, that's it."

"I hope Harlan's not going to be in trouble about all this . . . inconvenience."

"You know, if he's playing games, he sure could be."

"I suppose the sooner he shows up, the better."

"Right. He's chewing up valuable police resources."

"Dear me, would the valuable police resources like a Ferrero Rocher?" I opened a fresh package.

Detective Budge glowed. "Thank you, Mrs. Hobart."

"Miss," I said.

Of course, I'd backed myself into a corner. I had to get rid of Harlan permanently before he started to reek. Someone would notice me in my special van rolling a body into some convenient body of water. I couldn't hoist Harlan into a dumpster, and anyway his fingerprints and dental records could pin the tail on that particular donkey.

The key thing was to have no one find the body.

Since the police had already searched the grounds, the septic tank seemed the perfect place. If I could figure out how to do it.

In the meantime, I kept the A/C on and gave myself a spray with mood-enhancing lily-of-the-valley fragrance. My serotonin levels stayed up. The next afternoon, I was nibbling on a nougat-filled chocolate, staring out through the rain at the section of lawn covering the septic tank and smirking to myself when Detective Budge came back.

I felt my endorphins go into overdrive. I hoped it didn't show on my face.

Detective Budge smiled like he was glad to see me too.

My skin temperature rose, giving that lily-of-the-valley spray a second wind.

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"Any sign of your brother?"

"He's probably waiting until the painting's finished."

"That the kind of thing he does?"

"I'm used to it."

He strolled to the picture window and looked out at the ravine and woods. "Pretty remote."

"I grew up here. I love it. Gets a little lonely now that friends don't drop in so much, that's all."

"So he just leaves you all by yourself?" He didn't say "a helpless cripple," but I could practically see the thought-bubble above his head.

"It's usually easier without him. Harlan's quite a character. Just ask his colleagues at the club."

"Oh, we have."

"Really?"

"You know, we had a couple more calls."

"More . . . ? Gosh."

"You haven't heard anything strange?"

"Nothing but wind and rain."

"Gotta follow up. You know. Check the house and grounds again."

"Don't apologize," I said. "Take your time. It's a big place."

Detective Budge fidgeted.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. To my surprise, I found I cared about the answer.

He loosened his collar. "I couldn't help but notice the bruises on your face. He doesn't . . . hurt you, does he?"

I started to say no. Stopped. Averted my eyes. Waited a beat. "Harlan has an anger-control problem, especially since our parents died. He's working on it."

A muscle worked in Detective Budge's soft little jaw.

"You can get help. They have counselors. Safe houses."

Of course, Harlan never hit me. Too much evidence. They don't have safe houses for Harlan's kind of hurting.

"I'll help you." He reached over and squeezed my hand.

God helps those who help themselves, Mother used to say. How long had it been since anyone had helped me but myself? God never noticed.

"I'll be okay." My eyes stung. That was real.

"Well, Cuddihy better get started."

"Nice that you could come along too."

"I wanted to make sure you were all right." A red flush crept up his neck.

"Gosh, the police are really taking this seriously."

"Hardly. If they were taking it seriously they wouldn't send the Loser Brigade."

"What do you mean?"

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"Well, me, seventeen days from retirement, pretty well running on fumes. You know, that Cuddihy's been taken off anything serious since he shot the tires out of a gym teacher's Honda thinking a kidnapping was going on."

"Seems like a nice boy, though."

"Time bomb."

I held out the box of Black Magic. "Couple for the road?"

I would miss Detective Budge's visits. But, unless I found a way to get rid of Harlan soon, I'd probably be meeting him a lot at my trial.

He turned at the door. "Bit nippy in here. Sure you wouldn't like me to build you a fire?"

People were beginning to call. Customers. Suppliers. The club accountant. Some shouted, some bellowed, some whined. One woman cried. But they all sang the same song of money or services owed. Talk about a downer. I could see my family legacy slipping from my fingers because of Harlan.

Then it happened. I was in the hidden closet changing a dish of baking soda. Starting to get whiffy in there. I decided to get Mother's pearls down in case they absorbed some of the odor. The yardstick and pencil did the trick. The entire case tumbled from the shelf. A wallet fell with it. I pocketed the pearls and the garnet earrings and opened the wallet. That's when I found Harlan's passport and a pair of airline tickets to Costa Rica. *Ha ha, Harlan. What were you up to?*

I looked up at that shelf and spotted something else. Father's old leather case. Harlan usually kept that near his desk. It seemed worth the effort to knock it down.

Jackpot. The case was jammed with fifties and hundreds. I stopped counting at seven hundred thousand. Cool to the touch.

Sure sent my serotonin levels through the roof. I backed out and celebrated with an entire box of After Eights.

Where did Harlan get all that money?

Maybe it wasn't all good news.

Heart in mouth, I called my broker. I could practically feel the frost on the receiver. "High time you returned my calls. Big mistake you've made selling those stocks in this climate. You lost a bundle. Your father must be spinning in his grave. And liquidating your IRA like that. Serve you right to pay tax on the works."

How had Harlan pulled that off? Forging a letter? Imitating my voice? Harlan could mimic anyone's voice.

He must have been busily liquidating things for months and he sure hadn't paid off any current home or club bills. But even so, where had the rest come from? Keeping secrets for a price?

Then someone had shot him, leaving the club on the verge of bankruptcy and me unable to pay the upkeep on the house for

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sure. It wasn't fair. Harlan hadn't been able to drive me out when he was alive. Would he succeed now? And worse: What if whoever killed Harlan knew about the money? What if they came back for me?

I got another serotonin blast when Detective Budge called to offer his help and support any time of the day or night. To suggest a counselor I might find helpful. He said Constable Cuddihy was also concerned.

"Thanks anyway," I said.

"Call anytime," he said. "I'll give you my pager number. Anytime."

Years of living with Ha Ha Harlan taught me you've got to plan ahead. Time to flush out the guilty party before I got flushed out myself. But at least now, I didn't feel alone in the world.

Mother always said opportunity is right under your nose. That would be my mouth. I used it to call everyone I figured he might be blackmailing and happened to mention Harlan had a date with a local reporter in the morning. At nine.

I called the club's suppliers, Buddy, Harlan's partner, and everyone Harlan owed anything to. Called Angie, Harlan's girlfriend. Told her Harlan may have skipped but, as co-owner of the Camelot Golf and Country Club, I planned to settle his debts in cash the next morning. Nine on the dot.

One reaction confirmed my nastiest suspicions.

Detective Budge arrived just before midnight, twenty minutes after I called him. He opened the front door using the code I had given him and crept to the bedroom where I waited, with the bedside light on low. Constable Cuddihy, in jeans and a T-shirt, was practically hopping on one foot right behind him. Very responsive, considering this visit fell well beyond the call of duty.

"Did you hide your car?" I whispered.

Constable Budge nodded.

"The prowler's still around," I said.

Constable Cuddihy's eyes shone. "You can't be too careful," he said.

"I heard him a couple of minutes ago," I said, keeping my voice low. "My back is bad tonight, I can't even get into my scooter. Or the van. I didn't know what to do." Same thing I'd told him on the phone. "I'm sure he's there."

Detective Budge still looked sleepy. His cowlicks were winning the battle. The cuff of his PJ's peeked out under his chinos like a small boy's.

"I haven't been straight with you," I said. "Harlan *has* hurt me. Maybe he's gone crazy this time. He's prowling around. I am truly afraid. You should probably have some backup."

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Constable Cuddihy whirled, his hand on his hip.

"Don't worry," Detective Budge said.

But I did worry. We were dealing with a murderer.

"It could be dangerous," I said.

"Not a problem."

"Should I have just called nine-one-one?"

"This is our case," Constable Cuddihy said, panting.

I was propped up in bed, my back to the wall. In every way.

Detective Budge sat near me. He pulled a Zero bar from his pocket and put it in my hand. "You know, you have to get to a shelter."

Constable Cuddihy perched edgily on the footstool. "I think so, too," he said. "Because . . ."

"Shhh!" I said.

The door handle gave a tiny squeak. We watched mesmerized as it turned slowly and the door creaked open three inches. A hand reached around the corner and flicked off the overhead light.

"If that's you, Harlan," I screamed, "you'll never pull this one off."

I felt exhilarated. This could work!

Even so, I damn near wet my pants when the door slammed open, smashing against the wall, and the Grim Reaper leaped shrieking into the room. In the dim light, his swinging scythe had a freshly sharpened look. The blade flashed in an arc inches in front of my face. I rolled and flattened.

"Meet your maker!" the Grim Reaper screeched, turning to swing the scythe to my corner.

This time I meant it when I screamed.

"Die die dieeee," echoed in the room.

I kept screaming when Constable Cuddihy's gun went off. The purple robes swirled as the creature leaped onto the bed, silver slashes from that scythe cutting the air.

Detective Budge was screaming too. Constable Cuddihy shrieked like an air-raid warning all through the volley of shots he pumped into the swooping figure.

Then it was quiet. Except for ragged gasps from Cuddihy and a gurgling next to me on the bed. Detective Budge crumpled to the floor, clutching his chest, issuing low frightened moans.

I managed to roll close enough to turn on the bedside lamp. I leaned over the bed.

Red foam bubbled from the Grim Reaper's lips. The scythe clattered to the floor. Intelligence still flickered in those wicked eyes.

"I get the last laugh, Harlan," I whispered just as the flicker died. *Ha ha.*

Constable Cuddihy leaned against the wall, his crispness evaporated, his face turned away from the headboard saturated with Harlan's blood.

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Detective Budge squeezed my hand without stopping even when he dialed. "What you must have been through all these years," he kept muttering.

"Traumatized woman," he added, at the end of the call. "Severely traumatized. Send a female officer."

I was in far better shape than he. Cuddihy wept noisily.

"Never saw anything like it," Budge said, when he hung up.

"Harlan must have thought I'd have a heart attack. I'm surprised I didn't. Perhaps Harlan had a brain tumor. What else would make him do such crazy things? The autopsy will tell, I'm sure." I did not mention that the thought of losing the three quarters of a million you thought you'd scooped could bring out the worst in a person. Especially a person who'd kill a perfectly innocent painter in order to set his sister up for the crime, reasoning that she couldn't go to jail without moving out.

"You know, I don't think I'll make the seventeen days," Detective Budge said as he assisted me onto the Dynamo. I felt his arms trembling as I held on.

"I'll help you," I said. We rolled toward the living room and the comfort of Reese's Pieces. "We can help each other."

Other officers arrived, uniformed and plainclothes. A girl with a blond ponytail turned out to be the requested female. She had a firm, capable smile.

"God, it's freezing in here," she said.

All through my statement to a pair of hollow-eyed men with notebooks, I could hear the distinct sounds of Constable Cuddihy vomiting in the powder room near the front door.

I felt bad for Constable Cuddihy. What a terrible thing to live with, having shot someone, even Harlan. But as everyone said subsequently, what choice when a deranged man dressed up as Death kicks open the door and slashes at you with a scythe while screaming, "Die"? Better Harlan than some poor gym teacher.

"It's over," Detective Budge said, stroking my shoulder as his fellow officers finished up.

"Yes," I said, "but I'm sure they'll have more questions later. Poor Constable Cuddihy."

"Would have been something sooner or later, you know. But I meant your nightmare with this man. He can't torment you any more."

I sniffled. My arms rattled in spite of myself. It would take awhile to get Harlan out of this brain.

"You can't stay here. . . . " I knew he meant with Harlan's blood all over my bedroom. "She needs something, a tranquilizer." He turned to the policewoman.

This was my chance. Mother always said you do what you have to.

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"Why don't I call your doctor?" She flicked open her mobile phone.

"No drugs," I said. "I could use a drink. A brandy."

"Sure." Detective Budge jumped to his feet.

"No! Don't touch those decanters. Harlan keeps them doctored with laxatives in case teenagers ever steal his booze."

They both blinked at me.

"Trust me. Harlan is so crazy that way. Paranoid." I didn't have to act to seem rattled. "I mean, he was."

In the corner of my eye I could see pathetic little Constable Cuddihy being helped through the door.

Detective Budge gave a panicky glance at his watch. "Brandy. Well, everything's closed now. It's the middle of the night. Maybe one of the neighbors . . ."

"It's okay," the policewoman said, "I'll take care of it."

"We have lots," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "It's in Harlan's hidden space with all his valuables. But I can't get the door open."

"Hidden space?" she said.

"Right. In back of the walk-in closet. I think you're tall enough so if you stood on the second shelf you might be able to reach the switch. The wall on the back of the cupboard swings open."

I tried not to feel for her as she marched capably toward the closet and the discovery of Harlan's second-to-last joke.

The sun warms the cottage dock in the late afternoon, good for the bones. Detective Budge has taken well to retirement, although, after a year, the steady diet of Mars bars has packed a few more pounds onto his spongy middle. He looks perfect to me, but I worry about his health. The investigation is over and cleared him unequivocally. Thirty-five years of exemplary conduct shone behind him. No one ever mentioned that last seventeen days.

He tells me the female officer has gone on to a promotion.

Constable Cuddihy is not so lucky. He still wakes screaming in the night. He hopes to do better in computer programming. He says he'll stay in touch.

No one ever claimed the body in the closet. Just some poor devil Harlan picked up somewhere, hard and wiry and bald like himself. A painter maybe. That Harlan. Anything for a joke.

I reach over to the chair beside me and pat down a wayward cowlick. There is so much I can never talk about. Never mind. Mother always said you should know when to keep your mouth closed.

"How sweet it is," I say, grinning foolishly.

Detective Budge strokes my hair.

I gently deposit a couple of Hershey's kisses between his lips. ●

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FLOOD

by Bill Pronzini

This atmospheric tale is a departure for Bill Pronzini, who is known as a writer of private eye stories and novels. *EQMM* was not surprised to see it, however, for we know that Mr. Pronzini shines at everything from the historical mystery to pure suspense, and, as here, can serve up a memorable "slice of life" tale too.

She sat at the upstairs bedroom window watching the river run wild below. Rain lay like crinkled cellophane wrap on the glass, so that everything outside seemed shimmery—distorted the low-hanging, black-veined clouds, the half-submerged trees along the banks, the drift and wreckage riding the churning brown floodwaters. She could hear the sound of the water, a constant thrumming pulse, even with the rain beating a furious tattoo on the roof.

Nearly a week now of steady downpour, a chain of Pacific storms that had lashed northern California with winds up to a hundred miles per hour. It seemed to her that it had been raining much longer, that she could not remember a time when the sky was clear and blue and the sun shone. The rain was *inside* her, too.

When she looked into the mirror, looked into her own eyes, what she saw was a wet, gray, swampy place, a sodden landscape like the one she watched through the window. One in which she was trapped, as she was physically trapped here and now. One from which there seemed to be no escape.

She shivered; it was cold in the room. They had been without heat or power for more than twenty-four hours. The fierce storm winds had toppled trees and power lines everywhere in the region. Roads were inundated and blocked by mudslides, one of them River Road, fifty yards west of their house. Flood stage along these low-lying areas was thirty-two feet; the rising water had reached that mark at eight last night, hours after the evacuation orders had been issued. It must be above forty feet now, at two in the afternoon. All the rooms downstairs were flooded halfway to their ceilings. The last time she'd looked, the car was totally covered and the only parts of the deck still visible were the tops of the

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support poles for the latticework roof. The roof itself had long since been torn off and carried away.

From the pocket of her pea jacket, as she had several times during the day, she took the ivory scrimshaw bowl. Smooth, round, heavy-bottomed, it fitted exactly the palm of her hand. Her grandfather had carved it from a walrus tusk and done the lacy scrimshawing in his spare time, during the period he'd worked as a mail carrier in Nome just after the Alaska Gold Rush. He'd given it to her mother, who in turn had passed it on to her only daughter. It had been the first thing she'd grabbed to bring upstairs with her when the in-pouring water forced them to abandon the lower floor. It was all she owned of any value, as Darrell so often reminded her.

"You and that damn bowl," he'd said this morning. "Well, you might as well hang onto it. We may need whatever we can sell it for someday. Nothing else of yours is worth half as much, God knows."

She stroked the cold surface, the intricate black pattern. It gave her comfort. Her only comfort in times of unhappiness and stress.

Shadows crawled thickly in the room—moist shadows laden with the brown-slime smell of the river. She found it difficult to breathe, but opening the window to let in fresh air would only worsen the stench. She thought of relighting one of the candles, to keep the shadows at bay, but the unsteady flame reflected off the window pane and made it even harder for her to see out. She was not sure why she wanted to keep looking out, but she did and she had all through the day. Compelled to sit here and watch the rain beat down, the murky, churning water rise higher and higher.

There would be another rescue boat along soon, maybe even one of the evacuation helicopters that were brought in when the floodwaters grew too dangerous for small craft. Rio Lomas, three miles to the east, had been cut off even longer than the River Road homes had, almost a day and a half; by now they would be airlifting evacuees to one of the larger towns inland, at a safe distance from the river. She wished that was where she was, in one of those towns, in an emergency shelter where she could be warm and dry, where the lights were bright and there was clean air to breathe.

Empty wish. Darrell wouldn't leave when the rescuers showed up. No matter how bad things were then, he wouldn't budge. He had refused evacuation in 1986, the worst flood in the river's history, when the waters crested at better than forty-eight feet. They had both come close to drowning that year, forced at the last to sit huddled in the attic crawlspace with the last dozen of his paintings wrapped in plastic sheeting like corpses awaiting burial. He'd refused to leave five years ago as well, the last time before this that the river had overrun its banks and made an island of their home. Stubborn. Fiercely possessive. Yes, and so many other less-than-endearing traits. So *many* others.

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She rubbed the scrimshaw bowl and watched the rain slant down, the turmoil of conflicting currents and weird boils and eddy lines in the main channel, the soapy yellowish-white foam that scudded along what was left of the banks.

Why am I here? she thought.

I don't want to be here. I haven't wanted to be here in a long, long time.

The old, tired lament. And the old, tired response to it: I have nowhere else to go. Mom and Pop both gone, Jack blown up by a land mine in Vietnam, no other siblings or aunts or uncles or even a cousin. A few casual friends, but none I can turn to, talk to, count on. Twenty-one years with Darrell, exactly half my life, and the twenty-one before him so far removed I can scarcely remember them. Where would I go? What could I do?

Sudden crashing noise from the far end of the house—Darrell's studio. He'd been drinking all day, and now he had reached the mean, tantrumy stage where he began breaking things. Splintering, tearing sounds reached her ears: He was at his paintings again. Not the better, finished ones. He never destroyed those oils and watercolors, no matter how drunk or frustrated or enraged he became, because they were his "true art"—the ones he believed were the work of an undiscovered, unappreciated genius; the ones he bitterly hoped to sell to summer tourists and the handful of local collectors, so they could pay their bills or at least keep their credit from being cut off altogether. No, his destructive wrath was reserved for the unfinished canvases, his "false starts," and for the unsold riverscapes and still lifes and portraits of eccentric river dwellers that he decided were expendable, not quite up to his own lofty standards.

At first she, too, had believed he was a genius. A great and sensitive visionary. In those early days she had wanted to be an artist herself, at least an artisan. Not painting, nothing so important as that, just the designer and maker of earrings and pendants and other jewelry. She'd felt sure she had the talent to excel at this, but he had convinced her otherwise. Ridiculed and disparaged her efforts until, finally, she'd lost all enthusiasm and given up her work, her dreams, everything except her day-to-day existence as Mrs. Darrell Boyd. But he'd succeeded not only in disillusioning her about her own abilities, but in giving her a true perspective on his as well. He was far less gifted than he considered himself to be, at best a shade or two above mediocre.

The description fit their marriage just as aptly. At best, it had been a shade or two above mediocre. At worst—

Footsteps in the hallway, hard and lurching. She sat rigid, staring out through the rain-wavy glass. Waiting, steeling herself.

"Hey! Hey, you in there!"

She no longer had a name in her own house. She had become

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Hey or *Hey You* or harsh epithets just as impersonal.

"You hear me? I'm talking to you."

"I hear you, Darrell." Slowly she turned her head. He stood slouched in the doorway, shirt mostly unbuttoned and pulled free of his Levi's so that the bulge of his paunch showed. Unshaven, red-eyed, his graying hair a finger-rubbed tangle. She noticed all of that, and yet it was as though she were seeing him the way she had been seeing the storm-savaged river, through a pane of wavy glass. She looked away again before she said, "What do you want?"

"What d'you think I want?"

"I'm not a mind reader."

"What'd you do with it? Where'd you hide it this time?"

"Hide what?"

"You know what. Don't give me that."

"I don't touch your liquor. I never have."

"The hell you never have. There's another fifth, I brought it upstairs myself. What'd you do with it?"

"Look in the storeroom. That's where you put it."

"I know where *I* put it. Where'd *you* put it?"

"I never touched it, Darrell."

"Liar! Bitch!"

She didn't respond. Outside, something swirled past on the cocoa-brown water—a dead animal of some kind, a goat or large dog. She couldn't be sure because it was there one instant, bobbing and partly submerged, and the next it was gone.

"Where's that bottle, goddamnit? I'm warning you."

"In the storeroom," she said.

"That where you hid it?"

"It's been there all along."

"You go find it. Right now, you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"*Now*. Right this minute."

She got to her feet, not hurrying. Without looking at him, she started across the room.

"And put that silly damn bowl away," he said. "Why d'you always have to keep playing with that thing, petting it like it's a fetish or something?"

She slipped the scrimshawed ivory back into her pocket, walked past him into the hallway. Each step was an effort, as if her legs—like the land, like the house itself—had become waterlogged.

The storeroom was between the bedroom and his studio. It had started out as her workspace, but when she'd given up jewelry-making it had gradually evolved into a catchall storage area. Boxes, oddments of furniture, unused canvases crowded it now, along with dust and spiderwebs. When they'd abandoned the lower floor this morning she had brought up as much food as they might need and what-

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ever else could be salvaged, and put it in there. The perishables were on melting ice in the big cooler, the rest scattered on boxes and on the floor. She poked listlessly among the food items and cartons, while he watched from the doorway. It took her less than a minute to find his last fifth of Scotch, more or less in plain sight behind the leg of a discarded table. She picked it up, held it out to him.

He snatched it from her hand. "Don't you ever do that again. Understand? You hide liquor from me again, you'll be sorry."

"All right," she said.

"Make me a sandwich," he said. "I'm hungry."

"What kind of sandwich?"

"What do I care what kind? A *sandwich.*"

"All right."

"Make yourself useful for a change," he said, and stalked off with the bottle cradled like an infant against his chest.

She buttered bread, layered ham and processed cheese on top, and then spread mustard on a second slice. Did it all mechanically, taking her time. She put the sandwich on a paper plate and took it to the studio.

He was over by the tall double windows, squinting at one of his older riverscapes—trying to decide whether or not to destroy it, probably. He seemed even more misshapen and indistinct to her now, as if there was more than glass between them, as if she were looking at him underwater. She set the sandwich on his worktable, between the jars of oil paint and the now-open fifth of Scotch, and retreated to the hallway.

The open door to the bathroom drew her. She went inside and close to the medicine-cabinet mirror, but it was too dark to make out her image clearly. She lit a candle and held it up. Her face, like his, seemed water-distorted, and when she peered at it from an inch or so away she could see the rain in her eyes. Behind her eyes. Rain and a turbulent, rising cataract like the one outside.

She snuffed the candle, returned to the bedroom and her seat before the window. Rising, yes. The river's surface was a ferment spotted with debris—clumps of uprooted brush, logs and tree limbs bobbing drunkenly, a fence rail, the shattered remains of a rowboat, a child's red wagon. One of the logs slammed against the side wall of the house with enough force to crack boards before it swirled away.

The rain continued to beat down in gray metallic sheets. The dark waters roared and shrieked like a wild creature caught in a snare, ripping at what was left of its banks, tearing them down and apart in a frenzy. She could *feel* the flood, cold, slimy on her face and the backs of her hands. Smell and taste it, too, rank and primitive.

And still the waters kept rising . . .

Abruptly she stood. On heavy legs, her mind blank, she went out and back to Darrell's studio. He was sitting hunched at the

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worktable, staring fixedly into a tumbler of whiskey, the sandwich she'd made uneaten and pushed aside. His portable radio was on, tuned to a Santa Rosa station, the voice of a newscaster droning words that had no meaning for her. He did not hear her as she stepped up behind him; he had no idea she was there.

You've never known I was here, she thought. Just that one thought. Then her mind was blank again.

She took out the scrimshaw bowl, held it bottom side up in her hand. She no longer heard the newscast; she listened instead to the roaring and shrieking of the flood. Then, without hesitation, she raised the bowl and brought it down with all her strength on the back of his head.

He didn't make a sound. Or if he did, the raging of the waters drowned it out.

She had no difficulty dragging him across to the window. It was as if, dead or dying, he had become almost weightless. The wind flailed her with rain and surface spume as she raised the sash, hoisted him onto the sill. The river was only a few feet below, all but filling the downstairs rooms; it boiled and frothed, creating little whirlpools clogged with flotsam. She pushed Darrell down into the brown turmoil. There was a splash, and two or three seconds later, no more than that, he wasn't there anymore.

She was seated once again at the bedroom window when the rescue boat appeared. By then, mercifully, it had stopped raining and the floodwaters did not seem to be rising any longer. The worst was over. Everything was still gray and moist and chaotic, but there was a hint of clearing light in the grayness. She was sure of it—light outside and inside, both.

When she saw the boat rounding the bend she opened the window and waved her arms to show the rescuers where she was. They came straight to her at accelerated speed, two men wearing neoprene wetsuits hunched in the stern. She knew both of them; they were volunteer firemen in Rio Lomas.

As they drew alongside one of them called out, "Are you all right, Mrs. Boyd?"

She touched the freshly polished ivory bowl in her pocket. It was not the only thing of value she had; it never had been. "My name is Lee Anne," she said. "Lee Anne *Meeker*. Jewelry-maker."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"Where's your husband?"

"Gone," she said.

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

She was not a liar; she told them the literal and absolute truth. "The flood took him," she said. "He was swept away in the flood." ●

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THE DO-GOODER

by Celia Fremlin

"...And above all, it will be as a good neighbour that Marion Pym will be most fondly remembered . . . always ready to answer any cry for help, no matter at what cost to herself. . . ."

Well, something like that. Marion was rather given, in her rare moments of leisure, to indulging in fantasies of her own funeral: of the lovely things that would be said about her; of the huge crowds, many of them weeping; and some, perhaps, regretting that they hadn't shown a little more gratitude during her lifetime. "If only . . . !" they'd be thinking, now that it was too late.

Celia Fremlin won an Edgar Allan Poe Award for her very first novel, *The Hours Before Dawn,* published by Lippincott in 1959. She has remained at the top of her profession through all the years since that triumphant beginning, spinning gripping suspense tales at both short story and novel length from the utterly believable quirks of character of very ordinary people. The following story revolves around a personality type we all recognize.

Sometimes, while indulging in this fantasy, Marion would chide herself for harbouring thoughts which amounted to unseemly self-glorification—particularly unseemly, of course, in one whose selfless devotion to others was destined to be the prime theme of her funeral ovation.

But (she would console herself) perhaps everyone indulged in this kind of funeral fantasy? Lots of people, anyway; people who have an uneasy feeling of not being fully appreciated right now, during their lifetime. Middle-aged women like herself, for instance, who have never had a family and who aren't all that good at making close friends.

Enough of this! Swivelling round from her telephone table and glancing across her pleasant, sunlit sitting room to the eight-day clock on the mantelpiece, she noted that it was already a quarter past twelve. She wondered how much longer she should wait? The

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message on the Ansaphone had been so very desperate, you could tell by her voice that the girl was almost in tears, and so frantic that she didn't even remember to leave her name. "I'll ring again in half an hour!" she'd said, "I'll ring every half-hour until I do find you in."

She hadn't, though. An hour and a quarter had already passed, and it began to look as if the girl's trouble, whatever it was, had solved itself without Marion's intervention.

It was worrying. Disappointing, too, for Marion loved trouble—other people's trouble, that is—and there was almost nothing that she couldn't cope with. The doctor hasn't arrived in the middle of the night? Never mind, there Marion will be, assuring the family (far more confidently than the doctor could ever have done) that no, it isn't meningitis, it's only flu. And she's right, too, quite as often as the doctor is. And then there was that time when a neighbour's grandpa went wandering again from the house on the corner and the police weren't bothering to look for him. Was it not Marion who tracked him down in the small hours to the local pub, outside which he was patiently waiting for opening time at two in the morning?

That sort of thing. Marion loved it. She loved to help. She also loved to regale the rest of the neighbourhood with the story of these dramatic little events; and they loved it, too.

So what's the harm? Everyone is loving it: The victim is actually helped (more often than not); and Marion wins a degree of popularity which she would otherwise never attain. She has become a sort of Scheherazade of the suburbs without even trying.

But before she had time to analyse her moral dilemma any further—if indeed it was a dilemma—the telephone burst into life almost under her hand. She snatched up the receiver, and even as the tearful, frightened voice began to crackle in her eardrum, she felt the familiar, uneasy lift of the spirits which someone else's troubles always brought her. Already it sounded like something exciting.

By now, Marion had managed to identify the tearful voice as that of June Chivers, the granddaughter of the Mrs. Chivers who had recently fallen and broken her hip just outside Sainsbury's, and had been accompanied in the ambulance by Marion, who—wouldn't you know it?—had happened to be shopping at Sainsbury's that very same morning.

So what new disaster had struck the family? To judge by all this sobbing, it must be something fascinating. Marion pressed the receiver tightly against her ear, all agog for whatever it might be.

Bit by bit the story came out; bit by bit it began to make a sort of sense: It had a beginning, a middle, and an . . . No, not an end . . . Not yet. This was where Marion would be coming in.

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June was a social worker, recently qualified, and it seemed that she was now facing a problem which must be fairly common among persons of her profession. She had been allotted the task of keeping an eye on the welfare of a little boy of four who was on the department's "At Risk" list, and she was encountering difficulties in getting access to the child.

"The thing is, you see, Marion, the father—the stepfather, that is—he won't let me into the house at all. He stands there right in the doorway and tells me that Daniel is out playing with friends, or that he's at his grandmother's, or that he's fast asleep in bed and mustn't be disturbed. So what can I do? He's a huge great man, Marion, he sort of fills the whole doorway, with his elbows out and his hands on his hips. . . . It's like he's on guard duty, sort of daring me to push my way in. Because that's what I'm supposed to do, Marion: go right into the house and actually see Daniel, and assess if he's being looked after all right.

"But I can't, Marion, I just can't! I'm so terrified! If only I could have someone with me—you know—like two of us, but they say they can't spare anyone. They're getting fed up with me always asking for help with things, I know they are.

"But of course, the thing is, it doesn't have to be another social worker. Just anyone would do—just someone—a person so that I'm not on my own. . . ."

And so, of course, it was arranged, without a moment's hesitation. That very afternoon—at three o'clock—the two of them would meet right outside number Twenty-one, Acorn Place.

Acorn Place was a dismal sort of a street: grimy lace curtains and tiny, neglected front gardens, repositories for plastic bags and beer cans. No acorn, assuredly, could ever have flourished here, let alone grown into a mighty oak.

Marion looked around her with distaste, but also with that sense of excitement, of heightened awareness, which the proximity of danger can so often bring. Bring to people like Marion, anyway: not, alas, to people like June. Right now the girl was appearing round the corner, her round and usually rosy face pale and pinched with anxiety.

"Oh, Marion, thank goodness you've come!" she gasped. "I thought afterwards—after I'd put the phone down—I thought, what a cheek to have asked you; and so I thought perhaps you'd have . . ."

"Nonsense!" snapped Marion, "Of course I've come! What do you take me for?"

A good question; but, of course, a rhetorical one. It floated off unanswered on the sultry afternoon air.

It was Marion who rang the bell at number Twenty-one; June's own fingers were trembling far too much. She rang it loud and

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long, and when there was no response, she rang it again. She knew there was someone at home, for she had heard a shuffling and a sound like steps on stairs.

It was at her third ring that someone seemed to be coming to the door at last. There was a sound of bolts being drawn, of keys being rattled, before the door was flung suddenly open and the stepfather—for this must surely be he—stood before them. He was exactly as June had described him—a tall, burly fellow, filling up the doorway with his whole aggressive bulk spread-eagled across it.

"Lay off, will you?" he snarled, in response to June's hesitant queries. "Like I told you, the kid's not here. His mother's took him. She's buggered off, like I told you she would. So lay off, will you?"

He moved as if to shut the door, but Marion forestalled him, setting one foot across the threshold.

"Excuse me," she said, "but I think I ought to tell you that. . ."

Tell him what? She didn't yet know how she was going to end the sentence, but it didn't matter because something in her manner must have shaken him. The pale, slightly bloodshot eyes narrowed as he looked the two of them up and down, assessing the strength of the opposition.

"Like I tell you, he's not here," he reiterated. "And if you don't believe me, come and look. Have a look for yourselves."

A moment later he was leading the way along a dark narrow passage, made even narrower by the muddle of cardboard boxes and suitcases lined up along one wall. He showed them the kitchen first, and the old-fashioned scullery, and then the two living rooms—both very untidy, but with no recesses in which so much as a cat could be kept hidden.

"I'm afraid we're obliged to ask you to let us look round upstairs as well," Marion explained politely, but in a tone of absolute authority: And after a very tiny pause, their host silently acquiesced and led them upstairs.

A poky little house, really: three up, two down, and so it didn't take long for the little party to inspect the three small, untidy bedrooms, and the even untidier bathroom. Here was a sordid scene of dirty towels, odd shoes, and battered, half-used packets of this and that, some on their sides, with their contents spilling out of them—washing powder and such. No washing machine in this ill-equipped, ill-cared-for home. All the washing must be done up here, by hand. Right now, a medley of damp sheets were hung across the bath, suspended from an old-fashioned drying rack in the ceiling. So it couldn't have been long since the errant wife had decamped with her young son. Funny thing to do, to wash all those sheets just before walking out on your marriage. How much of the truth had the stepfather been telling them?

"Well, there you are. Satisfied now?" he jeered as they

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descended the stairs. "No corpses? No battered bodies?" and there was a note of understandable triumph in his voice as he turned to June, about to play his trump card:

"Come along into the front room and I'll show you the note my wife left when she went. In her own writing—how she is taking the boy with her, and all . . ." He led the way back into the sitting room, followed uneasily by June. "Just you," he told her firmly. "You're the professional. There's no need for your friend to stay any longer"—and with a peremptory gesture he waved Marion towards the front door.

"Okay, I'll let myself out," Marion acquiesced, and, ignoring June's desperate glance of appeal, she hurried out of the room. Out of the room, noisily along the passage until she reached the front door. Here she slipped off her shoes, opened the door just wide enough to be able to slam it noisily shut again, then, softly, softly, on stockinged feet, she tiptoed back along the passage and softly, softly, up the stairs.

Something was wrong. She knew it. She had known it all along. She must examine those upstairs rooms one by one, by herself.

It was in the bathroom that she found Daniel. He was sitting crouched on the damp floor, his fair hair falling across his eyes as he concentrated all his attention on a large, colourful jigsaw puzzle spread out on the floor in front of him.

A jungle picture of improbably green vegetation dotted with scarlet, blue, and yellow parrots, while below an amazing assembly of beasts—lions, tigers, antelopes, giraffes, snakes, and crocodiles—were all gathered together at the same waterhole.

"Hullo," he said, looking up as Marion entered. "You shouldn't've come in because I'm very ill, and you might catch it."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that," said Marion cautiously. He didn't look ill, not at all. He was a lovely child, rosy and strong, with bright, eager blue eyes. "What's the matter with you?" she ventured to ask.

"A very, very bad illness," Daniel insisted proudly. "I had four doctors yesterday, I was so ill."

"Four doctors." Marion was really taken aback. "Not all at the same time?"

"Oh yes. All at the same time. They examined me all over, and then one of them said: 'He'll do.' He meant I wasn't going to die, I s'pose. But you didn't should've come in like this, you didn't give me time to get behind the wet sheets. That's what I have to do when visitors are here, I have to stand on the back of the bath behind the wet sheets, and not speak, so the viruses won't get through to the visitor. Viruses can't get through wet sheets, did you know that? But, you see, I thought you'd gone—I heard the front door slam, so I thought I could come out. It wasn't my fault.

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Oh, look . . ." his voice changed abruptly. "Look, I've found the head! I thought it was missing!" Eagerly he slotted the giraffe's head onto the long yellow neck, laughing excitedly. "See? His face is all up among the parrots now! He could catch a parrot and eat it all up!" He gave another squeal of laughter, then paused, and added doubtfully: "Would a giraffe eat a parrot?"

"Of course not," Marion answered, or thought she answered. But now her head was aching terribly, and the young nurse leaning over her hospital bed was actually smiling.

"Now, come along, dear," the girl was saying, "you've been dreaming again! 'Would a giraffe eat a parrot,' indeed! Whatever next!"

So she was ill? She had had some sort of accident? It was not until the next day, when the fog of the anaesthetic wore off, that she learned what had happened. Daniel's stepfather, alerted by the sound of voices in the bathroom, had crept in and knocked her unconscious with the very same mallet with which he had attempted to murder his wife a few days earlier, when he found her note. It emerged that he had been negotiating with a pedophile gang to sell Daniel to them for a child-brothel in the Far East. The "four doctors" of Daniel's account were, of course, the prospective abductors, checking on the price he would be likely to fetch in their evil market. They had arranged to fetch him the very next day, and it was only Marion's intervention that had foiled the scheme; for June had run screaming into the street when she heard the commotion upstairs, thus alerting so many neighbours and passersby that escape for the stepfather was impossible. He was already in police custody.

Marion was recovering fast from her head wound and so, in her distant hospital, was Daniel's mother. Daniel himself was staying with his grandparents until his mother should be fully recovered.

Both Marion and June, naturally, were featured as heroines in the local paper, and it would be hard to say which of them enjoyed the role most. June was enjoying, at last, the heartfelt approval of her colleagues at work, while Marion, of course, was in her element, retelling the story over and over again to all and sundry.

So much was she enjoying herself that she was quite startled when she was told that she was in grave danger of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and needed to see a counsellor.

"But I'm perfectly all right!" she protested; adding, gratuitously, "And anyway, I think this counselling business is all a lot of nonsense. I don't believe it ever does any good. . . ."

She acquiesced in the project, however—it seemed churlish and ungrateful not to—and in the event was amazed at how marvellous it made her feel. For it turned out that the counsellor—a woman of about her own age—had just moved into the top floor of a very old house and was beginning to fear that it was haunted. "I

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keep hearing this voice, somewhere in the wall—the outside wall, so it can't be one of the neighbours. It kind of moans and seems to be saying, 'Please . . . Please . . .' Unless it's only wind. . . . If only I could have someone there with me when it happens. . . . But it's usually about two in the morning and obviously I couldn't expect any visitor to stay that late. . . ."

And so, of course, it was arranged. "And if it does seem at all supernatural, we'll get the vicar in to exorcise it," Marion declared eagerly; then: "What, you've already asked him, and he says he can't, the Church doesn't do exorcisms anymore? Don't worry; I'll sort him out!"

She would, too: Marion was beside herself with excitement and anticipation.

Who says counselling never does anyone any good? ●

Past Tense

by Wendy Stricker

She was an English teacher—
Proper usage was her obsession.
She found parsing a positive pleasure
And declining a delightful digression.
But as the years passed she discovered
Her students were much more obtuse
Than the ones she had taught in her early career
And she started to think, "What's the use?"

One evening while marking class essays
The tears poured like rain down her cheeks.
They would not use correct punctuation
Though she'd been drilling them on it for weeks!
They had no conception of syntax;
They allowed participles to dangle.
She could only despair of making her way
Through prose too confused to untangle.

In distress she sought out her husband
And found him absorbed in a book.
"What are you reading?" she asked him.
He answered her without a look,
And unconscious of her demeanor
"It's a clever whodunit," he said.
"That's 'Who *did* it'!" she shrieked, then pulled out a gun
And felled him with a shot through the head.

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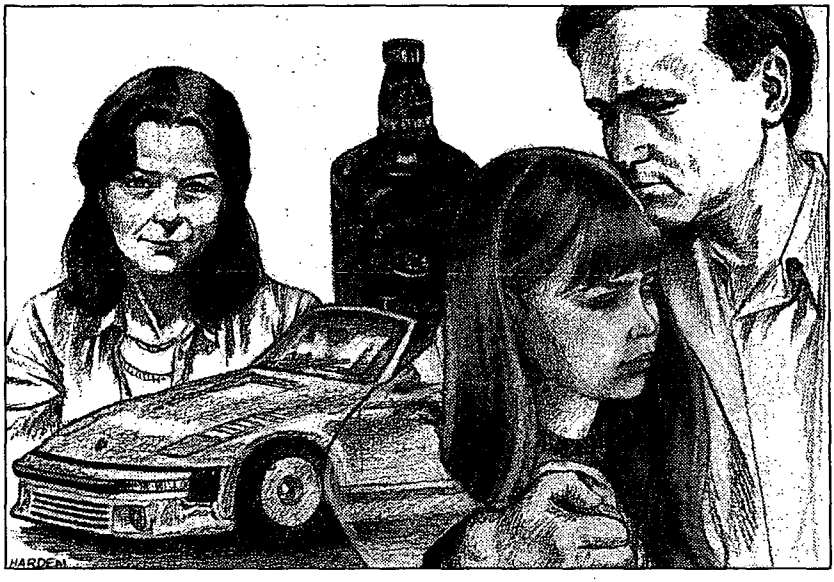

Art by Laurie Harden

THE LONG WAY BACK

by Ed Gorman

Giff's new red Porsche attracted as much attention as he wanted it to. It wasn't often that a development like this one played host to a car that cost as much as most of the houses. He could've flown here, but sometimes he liked the cross-country driving.

Giff Bryant knew where he was going. He'd been here before. Too many times, in fact. He'd hoped that by now his brother Michael would have been able to afford a nicer home.

As the Porsche wound its way through the narrow, confusing streets of the development, people paused to look at it. The lady raking her front lawn. The older man washing his older car. The young boy dressed up in a football helmet and jersey, running touchdowns that would fill his ears with endless applause only he could hear. This was 3:37 of an early and warm October afternoon, school having just let out.

He tried not to notice how shabby the homes were. Window cracks covered with tape. Roofs that needed new shingles. Front windows missing shutters. Hardscrabble lives were lived here, and that

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certainly included Michael's.

He pulled the Porsche smartly into the drive of 4216 Palmer Drive and parked the car.

A boy and a girl were standing by the garage shooting baskets. The backboard was rusty, the net gnarled.

When they saw who it was, the girl stopped shooting and dropped the ball and ran over to the Porsche.

"Uncle Giff!" she said. She was eleven and her name was Amy. She was a slight, sweet-faced girl with a perky little ponytail.

She hugged him hard.

The boy was named Karl. He was twelve. He was fleshy in the way of his father. There was also a hint of his father's sourness in his dark eyes. Giff knew why the boy seemed reluctant to hug him. Karl was his mother's son. He shared all her likes and dislikes. Giff wasn't exactly Mae's favorite.

"The Long Way Back" develops one of writer Ed Gorman's favorite themes, familial relationships and the motives created by a troubled past. The story has been optioned for television by Black Angel Productions and will appear in a collection of Mr. Gorman's stories to be published later this year under the title *Famous Blue Raincoat and Other Stories* (Crippen & Landru Publishers). ✝

Giff put his arm out and Karl came over and hugged him, too. Karl wore his Cubs cap backwards, the way rap stars did.

"I'll bet I know what you're wondering," Giff said to both of them. He was a tall, gym-hardened man who was just now, at age forty-one, starting to go bald. A long time ago he'd decided that he liked the corporate look. His suits, like the gray tweed he wore now, were invariably Brooks Brothers. "You're wondering what Uncle Giff bought you."

He saw Karl staring at a point just to the right of his shoulder. He turned. Mae, pretty Mae, was watching him through the kitchen window. He waved to her and smiled. She waved back, though without any enthusiasm. And she didn't smile.

Amy at least had the grace to look embarrassed by her mother's attitude. Giff turned back to the kids and then reached inside his suit-coat pocket and brought out two crisp green fifty-dollar bills.

Even sullen Karl was impressed.

"One for you," Giff said, handing the bill over to Amy. "And one for you, Karl."

"Wow," Amy said. "Is this real?"

"No," Giff said. "It's counterfeit. I have a printing press in my basement."

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Amy giggled and hugged him again.

"Thanks, Uncle Giff," Karl said. The only time he ever sounded happy around Giff was when Giff was giving him things.

"We have new furniture," Amy said. "Wait till you see it."

She took Giff's hand and led him inside.

"This is really nice," Giff said. "The furniture, I mean."

"We like it," Mae said. As always, she sounded slightly defensive.

Actually, he hated the stuff. It was the kind of furniture you bought by the room instead of the piece. The fabric color of the couch and two matching chairs didn't help any. Some kind of wine red that played hell with the green carpeting.

Mae saw where he was looking. "We're going to get new carpeting next spring." Then added, "If Michael gets his promotion."

"Promotion?" Giff said, putting the kind of enthusiasm into the word a Chamber of Commerce type would. "Hey, he didn't mention that."

"Assistant manager," she said. "And they're talking about his own store within a year. They're building one in Rock Island, which'd be nice."

"Fantastic," Giff said, still making himself sound impressed.

Mae said, "You still seeing that singer?"

Giff shrugged. "Off and on."

"We saw her on Jay Leno that time."

"She's had a nice, solid career."

"Michael's always telling people about how you're going out with her."

"I haven't seen her in a while, actually," Giff said.

He'd been doing a little trophy hunting. Had spent a weekend in Vegas and met her at a blackjack table. Everybody was making a fuss over her. Her third CD, a kind of combination disco and salsa thing, was in the Top 40. And she'd not only done Leno, she'd also done a Barbara Walters interview. Barbara had asked her if she believed in God, Heather having survived a car accident two years ago, and then Heather'd had a good on-camera cry.

For a time, it had been fun and had made him feel important. A West Side kid from Cedar Rapids hanging out with a singing star. She liked him a lot. In fact, two months into their relationship, she'd told him she a) loved him and b) was preggers. Neither one of them wanted the kid. He flew her to L.A., where there was a clinic he'd used on several previous occasions. It was a private, secret clinic. You didn't run into any plump, shrieking right-to-life housewives or stolid, lesbian nuns on the sidewalks out front. After that, they drifted apart. It had been his experience that abortions had that effect on relationships sometimes. He didn't

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know why. He didn't give it much thought, either. No broken hearts, no bitter last words.

Now, he was dating a very wealthy divorcée who drank a lot at the nightclub he was managing this year. She was actually much better-looking than the recording star, and a lot more fun in bed. Still, it had been nice to go out with the recording star, something to work into the conversation when you met somebody new. It was like having an especially good credential on your resumé.

Then she said, "He's drinking again."

"I just talked to him last week. He said everything was fine."

"He lies. You know that. Addicted people lie all the time."

"God dammit," Giff said. He didn't know what else to say.

"He made it seven months this time," Mae said. "Without a drink, I mean. I suppose I should be grateful. He's never made it seven months before."

Mae was a faded flower. She was still very pretty, she had classic facial bones, but fifteen years of marriage and motherhood had taken their toll. It was like looking at somebody in black and white who had once been in vivid color. She wore a white blouse and blue slacks. Her shoes were scuffed and needed heels.

She said, "He still compares himself to you."

"This is my fault?" Giff said. "That's what you're trying to tell me? This is my fault? God dammit, Mae, don't start this crap with me again. Don't start it at all."

"I didn't say it was your fault."

But of course she had. She'd always felt that Giff was a bad influence on his brother, filling Michael's head with all sorts of fanciful dreams. Eight, nine years ago, Giff had even invited Michael to be his assistant in the nightclub he was running. This was in Miami, which at the time was experiencing a new round of cocaine wars, so the scene was both exciting and dangerous. Mae had resented how Giff had taken her husband away, uprooted him from his home in Cedar Rapids. She didn't understand Giff's intention, which was to get Michael making some real money, and send for Mae and the kids once he had established himself.

But Michael didn't amount to a damn as his assistant. He drank too much and started hitting on all the waitresses. When he started hitting on the lady customers, Giff stuffed three one-thousand-dollar bills into Michael's shirt pocket, handed him a one-way on United, and sent him home to Mae and the kids.

The way they'd grown up, near the poor section of Cedar Rapids, pride was a big thing to Giff. There was nothing he liked more than riding around Cedar Rapids in an exotic car, giving the locals envious thrills. The same bastards that had busted his father's back for a pitiful hourly wage, the same people who'd snubbed him in grade school and high school, and looked right through him

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whenever they glanced his way. But triumphing over these bastards wasn't easy. Took hard work. Giff was used to putting in sixty, seventy hours a week. Forty-five weeks of the year. That was how you paid them back, you worked hard. And, in Giff's case, you took some chances. Were his nightclubs merely fronts for mob guys who needed places to launder their money? Giff never asked many questions about his backers. Was a lot of coke sold in his various nightclub toilets and hallways, and did his backers get a piece of every transaction? Giff didn't ask many questions about that either. Hard work and a modicum of risk, that was how you succeeded. All Michael ever wanted was the fun. The ladies. The dance floor. The nice suits and sports jackets.

And the booze. Michael had been battling alcoholism for most of his adult life. He used to laugh about how Giff didn't drink at all. But Giff had seen too many men in his particular calling lose everything over liquor and lines of white powder.

"What time's he get home?" Giff said.

"Six, six-thirty."

"I don't want you ever to say that again, about this being my fault."

"It was a cheap shot, Giff," Mae said. "I'm sorry. I'm just scared and all. He just keeps getting worse and worse. Now he's even gambling."

"Oh God," Giff said.

"He found this place downtown, down by the tracks where the Magnus Hotel used to be. They gamble in this basement. Two weeks ago, he lost his whole paycheck. We had to take money out of our savings account to make the house payment." Her small white hands were like animals sleeping in her lap. Every once in a while, as if they were having bad dreams, the animals twitched violently. The twitches gave Giff a sense of how close to the edge Mae was.

"He's going to blow it at the store," she said. "They're going to fire him. I'm sure of it."

"I thought you said he got a promotion."

"He did. He started there about seven months ago, when he went back to A.A. and stayed sober."

"But now—"

"Now he leaves early and he goes to work with whiskey on his breath. And he's kind of out of it when he talks to customers and—"

She stopped and abruptly started sobbing.

She buried her face in her hands and wept.

Giff went over and sat next to her on the ugly, misshapen couch. Mae and he had never been close, not even when things had been good for her and Michael, and so he felt awkward about sliding his

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arm around her and bringing her to him. He held her as he would a child.

She seemed grateful for his strong arms, huddling herself inside them.

He became aware of her breasts against his chest. He'd never been erotically aware of her till now and he felt ashamed of himself. Giff was a decorous person. There was a time and a place for everything. You shouldn't be aware of your sister-in-law's breasts when you were trying to comfort her.

The kids slammed in the back door.

Mae jumped from his arms like a kitten jumping to the floor.

She took a Kleenex from her pocket, wiped her eyes. She was just starting to blow her nose when Amy and Karl reached the living room.

They both looked at her.

"You all right, Mom?" Amy said quietly.

"Why don't you go out and play some more?" Mae said. "Uncle Giff and I are just talking."

Karl watched Giff suspiciously, as if Giff might have been beating his mother up or something.

"Everything's fine," Mae said. "Now you two go and play, all right?"

When they were gone, she said, "You shouldn't have given them so much money."

"What the hell," Giff said, "I want them to be happy. You know, have the life Michael and I never had."

"You'd make a good father, you know that, Giff?" she said, still sniffling.

"Maybe," Giff said. "Maybe I would."

The dinner was the kind he remembered from his boyhood. His mother died when he was eight and Michael five. Heart disease. The family curse. The old man served the best meal he could, but it always ran to starches. The old man never remarried. He came close once, then backed out when the wedding was two weeks away. Said he felt guilty about their mother.

Dinner tonight was mashed potatoes, a hamburger patty, canned corn, a fresh spinach salad, and a modest slice of pumpkin pie. The kids said grace before dinner and afterward cleared the table for their mother.

"I'm sure this wasn't the kind of meal you're used to," Mae said. "The circles you travel in and all."

"I enjoyed it very much."

Every few minutes, Mae would look up at the kitchen clock. There had been no phone call from Michael.

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"He's going to be embarrassed tomorrow," she said, "knowing you were here waiting for him and all."

"I'm going to wait for him."

"You are?"

"I want to talk to him."

He sounded angry and he didn't give a damn that he sounded angry. The kids had gone to their rooms. The only person to hear was Mae. He assumed she was just as angry as he was.

After a time, they went into the living room and watched TV. They watched some sit-coms. Neither of them laughed, not even once. Then there was a rerun of *Chinatown* on. He never got tired of watching it.

About halfway through, Mae got up and excused herself and went in to say good night to the kids. It was now almost ten o'clock. There had still been no call from Michael.

At ten the local news came on. Cedar Rapids was still a small town, judging by the newscast. Not much happening at all.

"You sure you wouldn't be more comfortable at your hotel?" Mae said.

"You want me to go?"

"No. But I don't want to feel I'm holding you here, either. You could be out having fun."

"I'm too mad to be out having fun."

Mae went over and sat on the couch across from his chair. She put her face in her hands and started sobbing again.

He went out into the kitchen. Earlier he'd glimpsed a bottle of Jim Beam. He poured her a big one and carried it back to the living room.

She wasn't much of a drinker. Every time she took a sip, she made a cute face, like a kid taking bad-tasting medicine.

"You know the funny thing?" she said after a time.

"What?"

"This house, this development we live in? I mean, I know you and Michael think we could do a lot better. But I love it here. I really do. I grew up in a trailer park and it was really bad. I used to walk by here when I was a little girl. I thought that the people who lived here must be rich. I really did. All I ever wanted was to live here. I love it here. I like my neighbors and the school our kids go to and I love this house. I really do."

She started crying again, much more quietly this time. "Michael's going to lose his job, and we're going to lose this house. I know you can't understand this, Giff, but this was all I ever wanted, a house like this and a family."

"I'm going to have a real hard talk with him," Giff said.

"Oh, Giff, that's sweet but you know it won't do any good. I've

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had so many real hard talks with him, I'm all worn out. I really am."

The local news came on and then Jay Leno. They sat through his monologue without laughing even once. Every time they heard a car, Mae looked up sharply, as if they might be under attack. But the car always went on past.

After Leno, she said, "I don't think I can stay up any more, Giff." She nodded to the glass of whiskey. Over the past hour and a half, she'd drunk the whole thing. "I'm sort of drunk." Then, "You know when you held me this afternoon, when I was crying so hard and all? I really liked that. And I don't mean anything sexy by it, either. Michael used to hold me like that but he never does anymore. But when you held me, it was real sweet. It made me like you a lot, and you know we've never gotten along especially."

"You need some sleep."

"I'm sorry if it embarrassed you, what I said."

"It didn't embarrass me, Mae. I felt the same way. All these years we didn't like each other, and now we do."

"God works that way sometimes, you know. The nuns always told me that and I think they were right. God had you be here this afternoon so I'd have somebody to lean on. And so we'd learn to get along with each other."

She stood up. She was wobbly and it was kind of cute. Mae was very cute.

"What a cheap date I am," she grinned. She looked like a kid again.

She wobbled out of the living room and down the narrow, dark hall to her bedroom.

Michael drove in a little past one o'clock. Giff had gone to sleep in the recliner with the TV still on. He woke up when he heard the car.

Michael opened the back door quietly and came in on tiptoes. Giff was waiting in the darkness of the alcove that led to the kitchen.

The first thing he noticed about Michael was the blood on his hands and the right sleeve of his cheap tan sports jacket. The second thing he noticed was how much Michael had started to resemble him, now that he was headed toward middle age. Growing up, they hadn't looked like each other much at all.

"What the hell happened?" Giff said, coming in from the alcove.

Michael's head jerked upward. "Hey, Giff." Michael smiled. "What're you doing here?" He was so drunk, he'd apparently forgotten the blood all over his hands. "Huh?"

"You stupid bastard, what the hell'd you do?"

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Michael looked utterly baffled. He was that drunk. "I don't know what you're talking about, Giff."

"Your hands, you dumb bastard," Giff said. "Look at your hands."

He kept his voice low. He didn't want to wake Mae.

He took Michael by the shoulders and led him over to the kitchen table and sat him down.

"Sit there and don't move," Giff said.

Michael started to get up.

Giff pushed him back down.

"Hey," Michael said. But he stayed seated. He put his head down on the table and tried to cry. But he didn't know how. A lot of men didn't know how. Giff wasn't all that good at it himself. Michael kept saying, "It wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault." When he lifted his face some of the blood from his sleeve was now on his left cheek.

Giff microwaved some instant coffee and set the cup in front of Michael. Then he started asking Michael questions. It took two cups of boiling coffee and an hour for Michael to make sense. "You were shooting craps?" Giff said.

"Yeah."

"And after the game, you got into it with this other guy?"

"Yeah."

"The guy who had the dice?"

"Yeah."

"And you pushed him?"

"Yeah."

"Pushed him hard?"

"Yeah."

"God dammit, Michael."

"I didn't mean for him to die, Giff. I really didn't. He just banged his head against the edge of this door." Michael was starting to get coherent.

"You remember where this place is?"

"Sure. I play there every week."

"Mae tells me you blow your paycheck."

"Mae likes to exaggerate things."

"You don't deserve her, you know that, Michael?"

Michael smiled bitterly. "Now there's a switch. You defending Mae. You two are supposed to hate each other."

"Let's go."

"Go where?"

"Back to where the guy is."

"Hell, no, man. Are you crazy? The cops'll be there."

"Maybe he isn't dead."

"What?"

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"You were so damned drunk, how could you know if he was dead or not?"

"I felt his pulse."

"C'mon."

"I don't think this is a good idea."

"If you need to pee, go get it over with. And while you're in there, wash yourself up and comb your hair."

"You should've seen him, Giff. All the blood. I really got scared."

"Hurry up."

"I don't think this is a good idea, Giff."

"Right now, I don't give a damn what you think, Michael. Now get your ass in gear."

The Porsche seats were cold. The temperature had dipped to thirty-two. At night, moonlight and shadow lent the development a real beauty. The houses looked cozy and snug.

"I want you back in A.A."

"You *have* been talking to Mae."

"You're an alcoholic, Michael. You're killing your wife and your kids."

"I'm not really an alcoholic, Giff."

"Right."

"I'm not. Honest to God. I just drink a little too much sometimes. There's a difference."

"Boy, what a line of crap that is," Giff said. "You're an alcoholic and you need to start going to A.A. meetings again."

Michael stared out the window. They had just reached the First Avenue hill and were driving down into the valley where the downtown was. Michael said, "I'm scared, Giff."

"I know you're scared. So am I."

"You know what I just did?"

"What?"

"I said a prayer. I said, God, if you help me out of this one, I'll go back to A.A. I really will. You think praying does any good, Giff?"

"Can't hurt."

"The most they could get me for is manslaughter."

"Let's wait till we get there to start worrying about that kind of thing."

"You really think he isn't dead?"

"I think there's at least a chance."

"I meant what I said, in that prayer I told you about."

"Good."

"I shouldn't have gotten mad at you, Giff. You know, about A.A. and all. Deep down, I know I've got a drinking problem. I guess I just don't like people to remind me about it, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah."

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"Manslaughter's about all they could get me for, I mean at the worst, don't you think, Giff?"

"Why the hell'd you ever start gambling?"

"I'm an addictive personality, I guess."

Giff hated talk like that. TV talk was how he thought of it. Like you didn't have any control over yourself. Like if you said you were an addictive personality then you weren't really responsible for anything you did. But Giff kept it to himself. Now wasn't the time to tell Michael what he thought of TV talk.

They passed two cop cars on the way downtown. Both sets of cops, one of them a male-female team, gave the Porsche a good look-over.

Michael directed Giff down several alleys, always moving toward the railroad tracks that ran behind Quaker Oats.

The rail yards were dark except for a couple of green signal lights here and there. Maybe ten cars stood open and empty in the gloom. The smell of engine oil lay on the cold night air. Giff had the window down to keep Michael good and awake. The tracks gleamed in the moonlight. You could smell winter tonight.

They crossed the tracks, drove up a steep hill, and then angled right. A deserted two-story brick building sat on a corner. Graffiti covered the walls. The front yard was littered with beer cans, smashed wine bottles, and dog turds. All the windows were boarded up.

Giff pulled around back. They got out and walked to a side door. This had been a tool-and-die place for decades. Michael stood in front of the door and jiggled the doorknob. Then he led the way inside and down some steep stairs to the basement.

Giff had brought his flashlight from the glove compartment. The dust made him sneeze. Another family curse. Bad sinuses.

The landlord had gutted the place. The basement echoed emptily. Even a lot of the electrical wiring had been torn out, along with phone jacks and conduits. Their shoes crunched on a variety of hardened animal droppings. Giff played the beam of his flashlight around. In the middle of the floor you could see where they'd shot craps. There were crushed beer cans, a pint bottle of Jack Daniels, and what looked to be two marijuana roaches. A long time ago men and machines had filled this basement. Lives had been led here, paychecks taken home to families. Like so much of the Midwest these days, the factories had been silenced, as if in the wake of a marauding army. Back in the days when this factory had been pounding out work night and day, good jobs had been easy to come by. But not today.

"Where's your friend?" Giff said.

"Far corner," Michael said. He sounded increasingly sober, and increasingly scared.

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The beam found the guy a few moments later. Michael had propped him up in the corner. The guy had soiled himself and the smell wasn't nice at all. He was a bald guy, big in a fleshy way, dressed in a blue windbreaker, white button-down shirt, chinos, and Reeboks. Country-club casual. The guy looked as if he might have money.

Giff knelt down next to him. He checked neck then wrist then ankle.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Michael stood over Giff.

"Yeah."

"Oh my God." Michael sounded as if he might be getting hysterical.

"That's not going to help things."

"I killed a guy. I goddamned killed a guy. Oh, I should've stayed with A.A., the way Mae wanted me to. I swear to God I should have." He started walking around in crazy litttle frantic circles.

Giff played the beam to the back of the guy's head. That was where the wound was. It was a good-sized wound, too. Must have hit his head very hard. The wound, purple and all bloody, looked like an exotic flower blooming.

Giff stood up. His knees cracked as he did so.

"I'll go to Mexico," Michael said.

"Don't be stupid. You're not going anywhere. Now I need to ask you some questions and you give me the best answers you know."

"There're all kinds of people who saw me here tonight."

"You were alone when you pushed him?"

"Yeah."

"Think. Don't just say yeah."

Michael thought. "I'm sure I was."

"How about when you walked out to your car. Anybody see you then?"

"Not that I know of. But I was pretty drunk."

"But as far as you know—"

"—nobody saw me."

Giff shone his light in the dead guy's face again. "Who was he?"

"Conroy. Pat Conroy."

"He anybody special?"

"Downtowner. Mostly does favors for rich people."

"Favors?"

"You know. Their kid gets in a jam. Or some guy's sniffing around their wives. Stuff like that. Pat was always good at figuring out things like that."

"So he had enemies?"

"Uh, I think so."

Giff played his light around the basement again. He didn't see anything especially noteworthy.

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"We need to get out of here," Giff said.

"They're going to nail my ass, aren't they, Giff?"

Michael was sounding hysterical again.

"I really didn't mean to kill him, Giff. I really didn't."

"Yeah," Giff said. "I know you didn't."

They followed the flashlight beam all the way up the basement steps.

Mae was waiting up for them when they got back. She was in a frayed white terrycloth robe. She sat at the table drinking coffee.

She didn't say anything when they came in.

Michael went right to the bathroom. They could hear him throwing up in there.

"There was blood in the bathroom," Mae said. "What happened to him tonight?"

Giff told her.

"Oh my God. What's going to happen to the kids?"

"We have to stay calm, Mae. We have to think this through."

Michael came back. He'd put on so much aftershave, Giff could smell him as soon as he reached the kitchen.

Michael tried to kiss Mae but she moved her face away. Michael went over and sat in the chair across from her.

"It was all an accident, Mae," Michael said. "Just a freak accident."

"They'll send you to prison."

"Maybe not, Mae. Not if I can prove it was an accident."

She looked at Giff. "They'll send him to prison, won't they, Giff?"

"It's nice you and Giff got so goddamned cozy all of a sudden," Michael said.

"Keep your stupid mouth shut," Mae said. She glared at him. "They'll send him to prison, won't they, Giff?"

"Here's what we need to do," Giff said. There was no sense answering Mae's question. Yes, if the police conducted a competent investigation, Michael would be going to jail. Why make Mae feel worse by confirming it? "You need to get up and go to work in the morning, Michael, just like nothing's happened. If the police contact you, call me right away. I've still got some friends here. They'll steer me to a good lawyer. That's where we'll start."

"What'm I going to tell the kids?" Mae said.

"Nothing for now," Giff said. "Anything you say'll just scare them."

Michael was swooning again, shaking his head over and over. "I just don't know how it happened. I just don't know how it happened."

Giff stood up. "Get to bed, Michael. You'll need your rest for tomorrow."

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He looked up at Giff. He looked awful. "I'm not good at this stuff, Giff. Not like you are. The cops'll ask me questions and I'll fall apart."

"You'll be fine," Giff said. But he wouldn't be, of course. Michael was never fine about anything.

Giff nodded good night to Mae and then went quietly out the back door.

In his hotel room, Giff undressed and slid beneath the covers. He had a difficult time getting to sleep. He frequently did. Tonight he thought about Michael. Maybe Michael would have turned out better if Mom hadn't died. Or if Giff had done a better job raising him. The old man hadn't had time to raise him, not with working full time at the factory and putting food on the table. Giff had been selfish. He'd led his own life and hadn't paid much attention to either the old man or Michael. Which meant that Michael had been pretty much left alone since the time he was six years old. Giff should have done a hell of a lot better by Michael than that.

Giff got the call at eight o'clock the next morning, just about the time he was waking up from his troubled sleep.

Mae. She was sobbing.

"The kids heard us arguing this morning, Giff," she said. "They know what Michael did. They were both crying. I could barely get them off to school. They think they'll never see their dad alive again."

"Did Michael go to work?"

"Yes."

"What time's he get off work?"

"Five."

"I'll be out there then."

"God, Giff, I'm so sorry you have to go through all this."

"He's my brother, Mae."

"I know, but—"

"I'll see you at five."

Giff ate a small breakfast of poached egg and unbuttered toast in the hotel restaurant. He read *The Cedar Rapids Gazette*. There was no mention of a body being discovered in a factory basement.

Later in the morning, he drove out to Jefferson High School, which was where he'd graduated. He always came out here when he came back to town. He wasn't ever quite sure why. He sat in the parking lot and looked at the big brick school. Two thousand, two hundred students these days. The day was overcast and cold. But in his mind the day was sunny and it was twenty-five years ago and his life was all ahead of him and he knew that someday he would lose this sadness he carried with him. He'd never known what the sadness was about, just that it was always with him.

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But here was a seventeen-year-old Giff, just now coming out the side door of the school, wearing a tie-dyed shirt and bell bottoms, shoulder-length hair, and driving an old junker of a '61 Chevy. He was already doing favors for the nightclub crowd where everything from drugs to abortions were dealt. But when Giff looked at his old self now, he saw an optimism on the kid's face. He wouldn't have this sadness much longer. Not much longer at all.

Sometimes, Giff wondered if he was the successful one, after all. For all his troubles, Michael had a good wife and a nice family. Giff had girlfriends and fine cars. And the sadness.

On the drive back to the hotel, Giff heard on the radio that the man's body had been discovered and that the police surmise was that they were dealing with a homicide. The victim's name wasn't given.

In his hotel room, Giff lay on the bed trying to nap but he couldn't. He just kept thinking of Mae and the kids and how awful it was going to be for them.

He slept for twenty minutes and then got up and went down to the hotel gym and worked out hard for half an hour, fifteen minutes on the weight machine, fifteen minutes on the treadmill. He went back upstairs and showered. Then it was time to go to Michael's.

When he got there, Mae answered the side door. No radio played. No TV blared.

In the living room, Amy and Karl sat silently on the couch. Their eyes were red from crying.

"You hear from Michael?" Giff said.

"Huh-uh. You want coffee?"

"Please."

Giff sat down in the armchair and looked at Amy and Karl. "This'll all work out, kids. Don't worry."

"He's going to prison, isn't he, Uncle Giff?" Amy said.

"They'll kill him in there," Karl said. "I know a kid, his dad was in Anamosa, and this guy killed him right in the cafeteria."

"Your dad's going to be fine," Giff said.

"He didn't mean to kill him, Uncle Giff," Amy said. "He really didn't."

"I know, honey."

"The guy just fell," Karl said, "and hit his head."

"The police'll believe him, won't they, Uncle Giff?" Amy said.

"I'm sure they will," Giff said. "I'm sure they will."

Mae brought his coffee. "Why don't you kids go out and play?" she said.

"It's not very nice out," Amy said.

"You'll be fine, honey," Mae said. "Uncle Giff and I need to talk."

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"Talk about Dad, right?" Amy said.

"Right."

"He really didn't mean to kill him," Karl said. "He really didn't."

When they were gone, Mae said, "He isn't at work."

"When did you check?"

"Just now. In the kitchen. I phoned, I mean." Then, "Maybe he's running away."

"I don't think so. Most likely he's getting drunk somewhere."

"Oh, great. Drunk on top of everything else."

She went over to the couch and sat down. Tears were beyond her now. She looked angry and scared. "This wasn't enough for him. The kids weren't enough and the house wasn't enough and I wasn't enough."

"That's probably my fault," Giff said. "I didn't do a very good job of raising him. Neither did the old man. He spent a lot of time running with a bad crowd and we never really broke him of it."

"It's gonna kill those kids, if he has to go to prison, I mean."

"I know."

She had just finished speaking when they heard the car in the drive. Mae got up and went to a side window. "It's him."

"Good."

"He doesn't look drunk. He's walking fine."

"Great," Giff said.

Michael came in. He smelled of cold but he didn't smell of liquor. He carried his winter coat over to the front closet and hung it up. He didn't say anything. He came over and sat down next to Mae.

"I've been in church most of the afternoon," he said.

"Church?" Mae said.

"I made the Stations of the Cross and then I just sat there and prayed." Michael took Mae's hand and held it. "I'm not as scared as I was." He looked at Giff and smiled sadly. "Giff isn't a believer. I suppose this sounds crazy to him."

"Better than going to some bar," Giff said.

"I'm ready for when they come," Michael said. "I'm going to tell them the truth and whatever happens happens. That's what I was praying for. Strength. I've never had it much before. Now I've got it. I can feel it." He tapped his chest dramatically. "Right in here."

"Maybe they won't ever connect you to him dying," Mae said.

Giff and Michael looked at each other. They knew she was just wishing out loud. But they didn't want to hurt her.

"Maybe," Giff said.

"Yeah," Michael said. "Maybe."

The kids came in. Amy went over and hugged Michael so tight she looked as if she was trying to crush him. Karl stood to the side and just looked at his father. Karl's eyes were damp and every few moments, his lower lip trembled.

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Mae finally had to pry Amy away from her father. Mae took the kids down the hall. A door closed. You could hear Amy crying behind it.

Michael sat on the edge of the couch, very tense, and said, "I'm not even scared anymore. Going to church really helped me, Giff."

Giff could see that his little brother wanted to cry, too.

"I feel good in here, you know?" Michael said and tapped his chest again. Mae came out. "I'll put on some supper."

"Thanks, honey," Michael said.

"Will you stay and eat, Giff?"

"Sure. Thanks, Mae."

Mae went out to the kitchen.

"It'll be nice to have you here for dinner," Michael said. He still looked like he wanted to cry.

The car pulled into the driveway just as the CBS news came on the TV screen.

Giff heard the car. He glanced to the front door.

Michael heard it, too. His whole body twitched violently.

They both knew who was here.

Mae came out. "There's a black car in the driveway."

"Detectives," Michael said.

Just then, Amy starting sobbing again.

"Giff, I'll wait here with Michael. Could you go in and just give her a hug? She really loves you, Giff."

"Sure," Giff said. Then, "You don't have to tell them anything, Michael."

"I know."

"I'm going to get you the best lawyer around here."

"Thanks, Giff." Michael's right arm was shaking. Mae's eyes glistened. She made a sign of the cross as they heard two car doors slam.

Giff went into Amy's room. It was tiny and pink and fixed up prettily.

Amy lay facedown on the bed, weeping. Karl sat next to her, rubbing her back.

"Come on, Amy. Come on, Amy." Karl said it over and over, like a prayer.

"He's going to prison," she said it every few seconds. "He's going to prison."

Karl looked up at his Uncle Giff. Giff nodded and Karl stood up and Giff sat down on the bed next to Amy.

He turned her over and lifted her up and sat her in his lap. She put her head on his shoulder, the way a small child would. Her face was warm and wet from her tears.

Karl nodded a goodbye and left the room.

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"We won't ever see him again, will we, Uncle Giff?"

"We just have to wait and see what happens," Giff said. Then realized that didn't sound very optimistic. "Everything's going to be fine. It really is, Amy."

"I'm just so scared, Uncle Giff."

"I know you are, honey. But you've got to get hold of yourself, all right? Do you have some music?"

She looked up at him. "Music?"

"There. That radio. Why don't you turn it on and lie back and just try to relax a little."

"Karl said detectives are here."

"They are. But that doesn't mean anything."

"It doesn't?"

"Huh-uh. Detectives go places all the time and it doesn't mean anything."

She clung to him, hugging him almost to the point of pain for both of them.

"I love you, Uncle Giff."

"I love you, too, Amy," Giff said, standing up and knowing what he had to do.

He went over and turned on the small cheap radio. Amy had it tuned to a rock station. He turned it up a little. "You like that song?"

She nodded, sniffling tears.

"Just lie back and listen to it."

"I love you, Uncle Giff," she said again.

"I love you, too, honey," he said.

He went out to the living room.

Two big men in overcoats stood in the doorway. One of them had a little notebook in his left hand. They smelled of cigarettes and cold night air.

The bald one was saying, "We're just trying to interview everybody who was gambling in that basement last night."

Mae and Michael sat on the couch very close together. Holding hands. Giff almost had to smile. The way they clung so desperately together made it obvious that Michael had something to hide.

"I'm the man you're looking for," Giff said. "I went there after my brother lost a lot of money last night. I tried to get some of it back. I was sure the guy had cheated my brother. When I said this to the guy, he pushed me and I pushed him back. I guess I pushed him too hard. My brother didn't have anything to do with it."

As he was talking, Giff looked at Mae and Michael a few times. Michael would never survive prison. Somebody would kill him for sure. His family wouldn't survive, either. Giff knew what happened to a lot of families when the old man went to the slam.

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Mae started to say something, then Michael started to say something, but Giff fixed them with a sharp look and they remained quiet.

Six, seven years max—maybe less if he didn't cause any friction in prison—and he'd be out.

Unlike Michael, Giff would be able to take care of himself in and out of prison.

"You're confessing this," the bald detective said. "You realize that, don't you?"

"We haven't even done his Miranda," the other detective said.

Mae was at his side, then, sliding her arm around him, whispering in his ear. She looked up at him and whispered, "You don't have to do this, Giff."

He smiled at her sadly and said, "Yeah, I do, Mae. Yeah, I do."

Then he looked back at the detectives and said, "Read me my rights and then let me get my lawyer on the phone. Then we'll all go down to the station together."

The detectives still looked surprised. Most things didn't come this easy.

The bald one read him his rights and then Giff said, "Can I go say goodbye to my niece? It's just down the hall."

The detectives glanced at each other and shrugged. "Sure." Then the bald one said, "I'll follow you and wait outside the door."

Giff went down the hall, knocked gently, and then went into the room. The bald detective lagged a couple of feet behind him.

Giff went over and picked up Amy and gave her a kiss. "Everything's going to be fine, Amy."

"They're not going to take him to prison?"

"No, they're not, honey."

He held her for a long, tender moment. Sometimes with Amy, he didn't feel his familiar sadness. So now, for just this moment, he clung to her as desperately as she'd clung to him a few minutes ago in this same room.

Then he set her down. "I've got to go now, honey."

He walked out of the room and the bald detective said, "Seems like your brother's got himself a real nice family here."

"Yeah," Giff said, "he sure does." ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com.

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JERROLD'S MEAT

by James Powell

James Powell was born in Toronto and attended the University of Toronto before moving to France, where he studied and taught for several years. On returning to North America, the author worked for a time in New York publishing before settling down to full-time writing in Marietta, Pennsylvania. As you will see in "Jerrold's Meat," Toronto remains one of the author's favorite fictional settings.

Those few blocks of Toronto's Queen Street East were called Moss Park, after a long-vanished patch of green beneath whose trees and benches, in simpler times, a local drug pusher buried his wares, to be uncovered by those to whom he sold directions. A short street had faced on the park. What was it called? Moss Park Place? Moss Park Crescent? Lockhart couldn't remember. It was gone, too. Everything had vanished or changed. Everything except for the Sally Ann, the Salvation Army Hostel on Sherbourne.

Hardly a part of Queen Street for a restaurant with pretensions. "Dante's" had once been a grocery store run by the owner's grandfather. It was small and a bit too bright. The late diners, though few, taxed the air conditioner. Lockhart interrupted Dante's expression of pleasure at seeing him again to ask if the patio was occupied. The owner bowed and led the couple back to the small backyard which he had turned into outdoor dining with four tables and panels of white trellis stapled to the board fence. Leaving them with tasseled menus, Dante hurried back to tell his wife that Mr. Lockhart had returned, and with a lady.

The August night was humid, even for Toronto. An occasional breeze moved out of the darkness to make the Chinese lanterns bob as though floating on a sea of lead.

Lockhart, a large, gray, stoop-shouldered man with a strained face, explained, "I generally come here by myself. As you know, I am not the entertaining partner. That's Witlock's job. Several of the dishes are quite good and the prices are reasonable.

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Waste not, want not, as the saying goes."

"I'm sure it will do nicely," said Alice Horne. In her ten years with Jerrold and Son she had only known Lockhart as the partner she was answerable to for her expense account. Looking at him now, she found it hard to believe he'd once been very effective in the field.

Lockhart returned her gaze, noting again that Miss Horne had the asset of good bone structure, a woman who could be striking, or businesslike, or whatever she wanted to be.

He looked around at the yard. It seemed fitting, or at least symmetrical, to end things here. Lockhart had grown up in the neighborhood. In summer, this backyard had always smelled of rotting oranges. When the pile of empty crates and baskets grew high enough, he would hang over the fence from the alley, steal two-quart fruit baskets which the war had put in short supply, and sell them back to Dante's grandfather for a penny apiece. He scavenged for empty wine and whisky bottles, too, and sold them to the rag-and-bone men with their horse and wagons who rented old garages in the alley to store what they collected. Anything to keep out of the drunken house.

Dante brought their drinks, described the specials, and withdrew.

Alice Horne watched as Lockhart took a blue capsule from a silver art-nouveau pill box and washed it down with a sip of rye and water. Every other time he'd taken one he'd looked at his watch to see when he could take the next. But this time he looked over at her instead. "Old Mr. Jerrold used to say, when a man is tired of Jerrold and Son, he's tired of life. And I am very tired, Miss Horne.

"As I said, I'd have preferred to die unexpectedly. That being out of the question, I'd settle for quick." His voice was flat and without emotion. "My wife will be well provided for by the firm," he continued. "She has never delved into what we do. She suspects secret government work." Lockhart's short, dry laugh might have passed for a cough. "Old Mr. Jerrold once told me his neighbors believed he was in the white-slave trade."

Miss Horne's raised eyebrow made Lockhart ask in a voice reanimated by her surprise, "You didn't know I knew old Mr. Jerrold? Oh, he was still quite active in the business when I was recruited. He took me under his wing, you might say. Young Mr. Jerrold was something of a disappointment to him, not being a convivial man. Conviviality was important to old Mr. Jerrold. He and I often sat like this over a meal while he expounded on life and business, like a father talking to a son.

"Sometimes on Sunday afternoons we'd take long walks. Many did in those days. Mostly men of the threadbare sort. There wasn't much else to do. The Lord's Day Alliance people were losing their grip on things. But it was still Toronto the Good. Our favorite walk was along the lakefront, past the wharves and docks and

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shipping warehouses. I remember the schools of fingerlings that moved through the water. Like the wind across grass, I said. Like men's accessories, said old Mr. Jerrold. And he was right. If the water was gray they were silver. If the water was blue they were gold."

Lockhart smiled as if there was something sad about the fishes. Then he said, "While I think of it, tomorrow at the partners' meeting don't sit on Mr. Piccard's left. Giving the client more bang for the buck was always his obsession. Dynamite has made him quite deaf on that side. And be warned that Turner's something of a ladies' man."

Alice Horne smiled and lowered her eyes.

Yes, Lockhart could understand why she was pleased, becoming a partner in a firm that was the pinnacle of the profession. The large bronze plate beside the townhouse door read "Jerrold and Son, Expediters." Beneath it, like an afterthought, was a smaller "To the Trade Only." If this last failed to discourage walk-in business, then the implacable Mrs. Hickey, the receptionist, would finish the job. Though Jerrold and Son had grown into a worldwide operation, Toronto remained the home office because Canadians were too polite to ask what exactly it was the firm expedited.

That secret had only been threatened once. Old Mr. Jerrold himself, dying of cancer, finally tired of Jerrold and Son and blew his own brains out. His death generated some interest in the firm on the part of a zealous police detective. An appeal had to be made to people in high places to have the man transferred. After that it was decreed that when a partner tired of Jerrold and Son his successor was responsible for providing him with a death which would not again attract the attention of the authorities.

Since Lockhart wanted his dying to be quick, he felt he needed the woman's goodwill. "Miss Horne," he began, "I hope you don't think . . ." Here Dante arrived with the first course. When he had gone Lockhart repeated, ". . . I hope you don't think my earlier objection to you being brought in as a partner was any reflection on your work. Your time in London was very well spent."

"Thank you," said Alice Horne. Her voice was quiet and self-assured. She waited. She'd heard rumors that Lockhart alone opposed her making partner. She was curious to know why.

"And please believe it has nothing to do with your . . . ah . . . gender," Lockhart added. "We've no glass ceiling here at Jerrold and Son. My only reservation was the matter I was talking about yesterday." He felt suddenly foolish. He had told her many things yesterday. Could she separate the wheat from the chaff?

Miss Horne did not miss a beat. "You mean about a talkative man digging his own grave?" she asked.

Lockhart nodded gratefully. "Old Mr. Jerrold believed with a

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passion that if you listened carefully, a man like that will tell you how he wants to be killed. Do it the way he wants it done and when he sees death coming he will move to meet it rather than try to step aside.

"So whenever I was assigned a talkative subject, the kind I called Jerrold's meat, I tried to put his theory into practice. Oh, I never succeeded any more than old Mr. Jerrold did. I doubt if anyone ever will. It was more an ideal to strive for. Of course, the other partners find all this a bit too metaphysical. Still, I've always dreamed my successor would carry on Jerrold's tradition."

Lockhart looked at her. "Could a woman? Perhaps I'm being silly, but when a man meets a woman who listens attentively, isn't he bound to feel she's attracted to him? Mightn't that complicate her work?" Her smile made Lockhart concede, "Or simplify it."

"This Jerrold's meat, could you give me an example from your own career?"

"Well, I'm sorry I can't tell you it was young Mr. Jerrold, whom I replaced among the partners when his time came. But he was hardly a talkative man, not until his final delirious moments just before the fatal *vomito negro* set in, the last stage of yellow fever. I had infected him using a variation on the old-fashioned 'fanged doorbell' in the Up button on the private elevator to his penthouse apartment.

"No, the closest I ever came was Arthur Vernon." The name evoked a rueful smile from Lockhart. "Vernon, an Englishman of the flamboyant sort with a taste for the high life, married into a wealthy Brazilian banking family and rose to a position of trust. Fifteen years later he suddenly abandoned wife and children and absconded with a considerable sum of money. The family engaged us to remove this affront to their honor by killing the man who had betrayed them.

"Vernon had left nothing behind to help our tracking people. They suspected he'd fled to Europe, where he'd traveled just before his disappearance. Possibly England or Portugal. But he was careful to avoid the casinos and the expensive watering holes where embezzlers usually go to squander their money. He also gave up sport glider flying, at which he held several records."

Dante brought the main course and left again.

"It was more than a year before our break came," continued Lockhart. "A suit worn on his European trip had been sent out to the cleaners. In a pocket the cleaner found a credit-card carbon from a hotel bill and, thinking it might be valuable for tax purposes, had pinned it to the lapel. The suit hung wrapped in plastic in a closet until the family decided to give Vernon's clothes to charity. The carbon gave us Vernon's new name.

"He was finally located in central France. This was surprising

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because he spoke very little French. He was living in Valence, a city on the Rhône. Do you know it? Somewhere between Valence and Montélimar is the magic line that separates cooking in butter from cooking in olive oil, and the steep-pitched roofs of northern France give way to the Midi with its flat tile roofs in the Mediterranean style.

"I happened to be twiddling my thumbs in Zurich at the time. The day before my arrival there, the man to be expedited had been rushed to the hospital with acute appendicitis and would be beyond my reach for several days.

"So I had our people brief me on Vernon's habits. Then I took an overnight train for Valence with a coil of piano wire in my pocket, happy to put the time to the firm's profit.

"I always like to look a man in the face before I garotte him from behind. So the next morning I was sitting in Valence's Cafe Glacier reading the *International Herald Tribune,* which the cafe provided on a stick for its customers, when, as was his custom, Vernon came in. He had grown what looked like a most uncomfortable beard. Seeing his disappointment at finding the newspaper taken, I offered it to him. The next thing I knew we were in the midst of one of those intense conversations which are not uncommon when travelers who speak the same language chance upon each other in a foreign land.

"Vernon had a lot of talk stored up inside after a year and a half of not speaking English. He told me he had worked for a company that designed and manufactured gliders until an inheritance allowed him to retire to Valence, where his wife's ailing parents lived. In fact, I knew from our people that he was living alone and lying low. For my part, I claimed to travel in office equipment. We were, in fact, quite a pair, he with his cock-and-bull story and me with mine.

"But I let him do most of the talking. And behind all the words I saw he was an utterly unhappy man who'd dug himself a hole he couldn't escape from.

"In the beginning, to elude us he'd put himself in our shoes. What kind of man would we be looking for and where would we be looking? So he chose a city where he didn't belong in a country whose language he could not speak. And he resolved to stay there quietly without attracting attention, living a life that was against his own grain. But it would only be for six months or so, until the heat was off. But after six months, when he popped his head out of his hole, he decided maybe he'd better give it a couple of months more. Then a couple more. By the time I met up with him he was living with the fear he might never have the courage to break cover.

"Now, remember, I had time to kill and here was Vernon, the best case of Jerrold's meat I'd ever seen. We talked for over an

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hour and met later that day back at the Glacier for drinks before dinner. He loved talk and held strong opinions which he loved to defend. I decided to take a hotel room, so we met the next day for lunch. You see, I was convinced Vernon was so miserable that I might even out-Jerrold Mr. Jerrold and talk him, this man I'd been hired to kill, into killing himself.

"After lunch I returned to Zurich. But I promised I'd stop off in Valence in a day or two on my way through to my next assignment in Barcelona and we would spend the afternoon together.

"The Zurich job, by the way, was a revenge murder, a 'special request' from an old client, a wealthy Arab, who wanted diamond dust put in the subject's food. The better the diamond, some believe, the more drawn out and painful the dying."

Miss Horne nodded. "One of Benvenuto Cellini's enemies used the same method. Fortunately his jeweler palmed the diamond and ground a citrine instead." She could tell Lockhart was pleased by her interest in the archaeology of their profession.

In the restaurant proper the lights dimmed. Through the window they could see a smiling Dante carry a birthday cake bright with candles over to one of the tables. The candles seemed to add heat to the sullen night.

When the singing was done, Lockhart returned to his Zurich story. "I had a woman pay the room-service waiter to dust the subject's dinner with ground diamond, telling the waiter it was an aphrodisiac. Our man was not yet dead but quite beyond saving when I returned to Valence.

"Now just as the Rhine has its castles, the twelfth-century ruins of the Château de Crussol stand like a broken tooth a thousand feet above the valley wall on the other side of the Rhône from Valence. Late my first afternoon there, as I crossed the square back to my hotel, I saw the sun set behind the castle and then reappear briefly like an eye in the remains of a large window.

"So, at my suggestion, we spent our afternoon visiting the castle ruins. An old bus carried us over the river on a bridge built alongside the broken arches of its predecessor, destroyed during the war. After a three-mile drive or so we reached a small village tucked under the valley wall. We had lunch there and started out on the three-quarters-of-an-hour walk up to the ruins. I remember goats with bells around their necks cropping the grass. We passed a farmhouse built inside the walls of an old out-fortification of the castle.

"We picked our way carefully through the bramble and rubble until at last we reached the sill of the same vast, broken window I'd seen from the square. So we stood there with the drop-off just beyond our toes and the Rhône and its valley spread out below us.

"After a moment I backed off a bit and sat on a stone. Vernon remained where he was, fascinated by the edge, as I, feeling ever

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so clever, led the conversation from the ruins around us to history in general and from there to the utter futility of human life.

"Vernon stood scratching his beard, on the verge of a nod. But then he came and sat down across from me and countered my arguments with the beauty of a simple flower, the wonder of those days that fill you with the joy of life. Et cetera. Et cetera. Et cetera. God, how that man liked to talk. And how each word distanced him from the reason I'd brought him there.

"At first I was puzzled, for I knew he wanted to die. Suddenly, I saw my mistake and hoped I'd have time left to rectify it. When I was finally able to break in on his litany of wonderful things, I said, yes, perhaps he was right. And I began my own catalog of reasons to live. There were so many, I don't like to think about it now. But because of his love of sport gliding I concluded with the beauty of a bird in flight and what a joy it must be to ride the silence high above the good green earth. And, as I said this, I stood up and approached the edge.

"Vernon followed and stood beside me. When I was done, he, as I hoped, took the other side, arguing against everything he and I had just said. He spoke less for the sake of argument than the chance to talk. Life, he insisted, was contemptible, a jungle red in tooth and claw, an ant hill, a charnel house. Et cetera. Et cetera. And I stood there with him on the edge high above the valley floor, nodding and thinking, 'Yes, yes, and you want to die. Why don't you do something about it?' And he talked on and on. I suppose he felt he could kill himself anytime. But that afternoon might be the last chance he'd have to talk for a long while.

"The trouble was, it was getting late. If I didn't catch the next bus from the village back to Valence I'd miss my train for Barcelona. The later one, the Train Bleu, was a first-class express and considerably more expensive. In fairness to the firm, I'd given Vernon all the time I could.

"So I put my hand in the small of his back, interrupted him, and said, 'Well, my dear fellow, I really have to go or I'll miss my train.' And I pushed him over."

Dante came to ask if they would have dessert. Lockhart was happy when Miss Horne shook her head. He ordered them coffee and brandy. "This is the brandy I told you of. They keep a bottle for me. Not exactly a cognac. The vineyards are a bit easterly for that. But good value for the money."

After a moment Lockhart's thoughts returned to the Château de Crussol and he sighed with regret. "Well, that was Vernon, the closest I ever came to Jerrold's meat, the talkative man who digs his own grave. But in the end I had to kill him because he just couldn't shut up."

As Dante approached with the brandy and coffee Lockhart got

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up and excused himself. In the men's room he washed his hands and dried them carefully, pleased to see they were steady. He combed his hair and improved the knot in his tie.

Miss Horne rose when he returned to the table and said, "It's been a very pleasant evening. But I must be getting back to the hotel. Tomorrow will be a long day. No, please stay and finish your coffee and brandy. I've asked Dante to call me a cab."

She offered her hand. Her eyes were cool and clear. Lockhart did not protest. She was right. Her being there might draw attention to the firm. "Goodbye," he said, resisting the urge to add, "Thank you." He remained standing until she disappeared into the restaurant proper.

Lockhart sat down, took a deep breath, and looked from his coffee cup to his brandy glass. Well, this was as unexpected as it was going to get. Which one had she put the poison in? He hoped it was the coffee. Why spoil good brandy?

Before finding out, Lockhart, who had already calculated the bill in his head, drew money from his wallet and laid it on the tablecloth. He included a sizeable tip to cover Dante's inconvenience, for Lockhart wasn't sure he'd have enough time to make it to his car.

Now he took a cautious sip of brandy. Miss Horne's favorite poison, which left every symptom of a heart attack, had a slightly waxy aftertaste. The brandy tasted true. He drank the glass slowly, enjoying each sip and letting the last sit on his tongue before swallowing it.

Now he closed his eyes for a moment. Then he raised the coffee cup and swallowed.

"Damn!" Lockhart slammed the cup back down onto the saucer. The woman hadn't poisoned the coffee either. "Damn!" It should have been so simple. Lockhart thought they'd understood each other. He imagined her outside tampering with his brakes or some fool thing like that.

Disgusted and angry, Lockhart started to get up. Then, remembering Dante would not be inconvenienced after all, he reached over to reduce the tip. As he did Lockhart noticed that Miss Horne had left her brandy untouched.

"Waste not, want not," he told himself and took a healthy drink from the glass. The brandy's waxy taste took him by surprise and he almost spit it out. But he stopped. "By God, by God, I'm Jerrold's meat," he told himself in amazement. With a grim smile he finished the glass.

As Lockhart started for the door he felt a cold destroying wind buffet his heart. Let it blow, he thought. Not for an instant did he regret leaving behind a world with Miss Alice Horne in it. ●

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DA CAPO

by Janet LaPierre

The neighborhood, a mix of two- and three-story apartment buildings from the fifties, with the occasional older cottage, looked deserted in the weak winter sunlight. At almost five P.M., workers weren't home yet and kids were probably glued to television sets.

Teri Gowan made a bet with herself as she turned her elderly Toyota into the driveway of the cottage she'd been renting for the past six months. She stopped in front of the garage door, put the transmission in park, got out—and won her bet.

One of Janet LaPierre's strong points, in both her novels and her short stories, is her understanding of how to create suspense. She is capable of presenting a puzzling whodunit while also keeping us on the edge of our seats over the fate of her characters. If you can stand the tension in this new short story, you may want to look for her new novel, *Baby Mine* (Perseverance Press).

"Just in time!" James D. Worth strode past her, bent, and gripped the handle of the garage door. One hearty pull and the door screeched up onto its overhead track.

"Voilà!" he announced, brushing his palms together. "That big heavy door is a job for a man, not for a pretty little girl like you."

"Pretty" was stretching it a bit, although she made an effort. But at five feet six and one hundred forty pounds, Teri didn't think of herself as little. "Thank you, Mister . . . uh, James," she said. Over the space of two months, she'd finally given in on that.

Teri got back in her car and drove into the garage, pulling close against the right wall. Now he couldn't get between her and the kitchen door. And she wouldn't be able to get out that door tomorrow morning. Shit.

She turned off the engine, grabbed shoulder bag and laptop computer, and was out of the car, out of the garage in the space of two breaths. Worth, waiting, now moved to reach up for the door but she beat him to it and jerked the thing down with more complaint from tortured metal.

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"Needs oil," he advised. Tall body decked out in navy sweats with red cording, he looked ready to sprint the half-dozen blocks to his apartment for an oil can.

"I'll deal with it," she told him. "My father thought his little girl should be able to take care of herself."

"What did your father do?"

Beats me, she thought. You'd have to ask my mother. If you can find her. "He was a logger. Got killed when a tree fell on him."

"That's sad."

"Right. Excuse me," she said, and edged past him to head for the curb and her mailbox.

"It's okay, I already got it."

Teri spun on her heel to glare at him. He grinned and flourished a rubber-banded packet: a magazine folded around several envelopes.

She reached for the packet, and he held onto it a moment too long. "James, I'd prefer to pick up my own mail."

"Just trying to be helpful," he said plaintively.

"I know." Teri shoved the mail into her bag and set off for her front door.

"I'm off to Caesar's for Happy Hour." James was right on her heels. "I thought you might join me."

Up the two steps to the small porch; then she half turned and spoke over her shoulder. "James, I told you this afternoon I'd be bringing home work tonight, for Professor Magowan." Teri was a clerk in the Communications Department of California State College at Santa Luisa. "And I've asked you please not to call me at work. They don't like it."

"Don't call you at work, don't bother you at home. You make it hard for a man, Teri. Is this professor male?" His face was expressionless, the eyes ice-blue marbles.

"No," she lied. The little computer in its leather case was a weapon-weight to her hand; she resisted a strong urge to sling it at his head. Key in keyhole, door open. "Good night, James." Inside, she leaned against the door for a moment before turning the night lock and pushing off toward the kitchen, where she poured herself a glass of wine. She figured she had an hour before the first telephone call.

Friday morning Teri put her contacts in, brushed her unruly hair into submission, and considered her situation. James Worth had telephoned four times last night—to invite her out to lunch today, an offer she'd refused. To describe at length a television program he was watching and was sure she'd enjoy.

To tell her answering machine that it would be good for her to take a break. Finally, to read to her—to the machine—a short

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poem that ended with dead lovers, or at least that's the way it had sounded to Teri.

Wondering now whether the poem was meant as whine or threat, she smeared cream cheese on a bagel and ate that with a glass of orange juice while coffee dripped into her travel mug.

Coat. Umbrella; it was gray out there. Shoulder bag, keys, lidded coffee mug. Hand on the kitchen doorknob, Teri remembered last night's defensive parking, bit back one of those words she was trying to erase from her vocabulary, and went out the front door. She juggled the coffee mug while opening the garage door, hurried to her car with a niggling sense of something amiss, stopped short and stared before snatching the sheet of paper from under the windshield wiper.

"Dearest Teri, I want to apologize if I've made you feel I was hurrying things. Put it down to my eager and loving heart. I'll be out of town on business for several days. I trust my absence will make your heart, and all the rest of your lovely self, grow fonder. Your James."

"The son of a bitch," Teri snarled, forgetting her resolve. He'd come here, sometime in the night, and oiled her garage door, which was why it had swung up so easily and quietly just now. Then he'd sneaked inside to leave this slimy, insinuating . . . She squeezed her fist tight around the note, then thrust the crumpled result into her bag.

Midmorning, James called Teri at work to ask whether she'd received his note. With the department secretary and several other people listening, Teri didn't feel free to tell him how she felt about his invasion of her garage.

When she had hung up, Maggie Kline gave her a cold look and said, "I don't like to seem authoritarian, but you know department policy opposes receiving personal calls except those of an emergency nature."

"I'm sorry," Teri muttered. "I've told him. I'll tell him again. Believe me, I don't encourage him. He's a . . . problem."

"Not the kind who'll turn up here waving an automatic weapon, I hope!" Head high and eyes showing a lot of white, Kline looked like a spooked horse.

"No no, I'm *sure* he won't." Teri wasn't sure at all, but she wasn't willing to jeopardize this job. "He's an educated man, with a business of his own."

"You just make sure he *minds* his own business." Kline moved away to her desk, but continued to toss the occasional suspicious glance Teri's way. Teri kept her head down and her hands busy until Carol Daley, another clerk, came by to suggest they go to lunch.

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"I owe you, Teri, for the distraction. Usually it's me in the shit about telephone calls." Carol, a divorced thirty-something raising two children, leaned plump elbows on the cafe table and picked up her iced tea. "So, tell me all about this guy."

"He's a pest," said Teri flatly.

"One woman's pest is another woman's treasure, I always say. Come on, what's he look like? How old?"

"Maybe forty."

"God, Teri, talking to you is like breaking rocks. How *tall?"* At five feet ten, Carol was a big woman in every way.

"A little over six feet."

Carol's sigh mixed pleasure and exasperation. "Is he fat, medium, skinny? Does he have all his hair?"

A waitress set food before them and went on her way. Teri picked up her fork and cut into a quesadilla; Carol frowned at her salad and then at Teri.

"Okay, okay. He has plenty of hair, brown. He's fairly skinny; he runs." She took a bite of the crisp-surfaced beef-and-mushroom quesadilla, and felt better than she had in hours.

Carol ate a piece of roasted pepper. "How many ex-wives and kids?"

"None that I know of."

"Incredible."

"Carol, he's *hassling* me, even though I've never given him the least encouragement. He comes by my house every day, he calls me three or four times a night. He keeps asking me out for a drink, or lunch, or dinner, however many times I say no."

Carol's expression suggested that Teri belonged on some other planet.

"Last night he got into my garage and left this on my windshield." Teri pulled the crumpled paper from her bag and smoothed it out on the table.

"'My eager and loving heart'!" Carol clasped both her hands over her own heart.

"Yuk."

"Look, Teri . . ." Carol reached over and cut herself a bite of Teri's quesadilla. "God, I don't see how you can eat stuff like this and stay in the shape you're in. Speaking of which." She cocked her head and gave Teri an assessing look. "Even if you insist on dressing like a virgin right out of Sacred Heart High . . ."

Teri's long-sleeved white blouse, with a bit of lace in the demure vee of the neckline, was tucked into straight-legged black wool pants. "Mrs. Kline wants a businesslike appearance."

Carol ignored this. "But you don't talk like one, or move like one. And you've gotta be what, twenty-seven, twenty-eight?"

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"Twenty-five."

"Really? Still, in this day and age I'm surprised an independent woman of twenty-five would be scared of guys."

"I have no trouble dealing with a pat on the butt or a straight come-on. But a grown-up man who won't hear 'no' and just keeps hanging around smiling—that's creepy."

"Has he tried to get physical?" asked Carol.

"Not yet," said Teri.

Carol munched a forkful of lettuce. "So why not go out with him one time? Then if you still don't like him, you can say you gave him a chance, and it just didn't work, and he should look elsewhere."

"That doesn't . . . feel right." Teri picked up the note and returned it to her purse.

"Think about it, okay? And let your Auntie Carol know what happens."

Afternoon in the office was enlivened by the arrival, at hourly intervals, of florists' bouquets. Although all were addressed to Teri, from James, with love, she took care to spread them around, so that by the end of the day each of the four desks bore a vaseful of color and fragrance. Teri made sure Margaret Kline got the prize offering, an elegant arrangement of sagey-smelling green spears and branches of spring blossoms.

Her job not at hazard for the moment, Teri drove home that evening in some uneasiness, wondering what James's latest ploy meant. Was he giving her up, saying a flamboyant floral goodbye?

Or was he underlining the verse he'd read her? "Lovers lying two and two/ Ask not whom they sleep beside,/ And the bridegroom all night through/ Never turns him to the bride." Teri had asked Professor Magowan about the lines; he said they were by a minor English poet named Housman who wrote catch-in-the-throat stuff about love and death.

She pulled into her driveway, stopped, and counted off a minute, and another; but James didn't appear. Really gone? Merely holding back to torment her, the way he'd held onto her mail yesterday?

Teri put the car away, checked her mailbox, and waved to the gangly orange-haired adolescent boy saluting her from the balcony of the apartment building across the street—Mike something. Inside the cottage, she did her usual check-over. She had never invited James in, and she had no evidence that he'd ever managed entry on his own; but she figured he would, one day.

Not today, so far as she could tell. She changed into old Levi's and a purple sweatshirt, took out her contacts, poured herself a glass of chardonnay, and felt her whole body relax, like a too-tight

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guitar string as its tuning peg was eased back. What had James said, several days? So she had the weekend at least.

Putting the wine bottle back in the refrigerator, she checked dinner options and found bread, eggs, oranges, and a brown-edged head of lettuce. Never mind, she wasn't hungry yet. With Shawn Colvin, then Nancy Griffith, and later the Indigo Girls filling the house with music, the dining-area window open slightly to let in rain-washed air, Teri sat at the table, finished her wine and switched to mineral water, and put in some overtime-pay work on Dr. Hal Magowan's class notes.

The telephone did not ring, the neighborhood was quiet. Once, thinking she sensed movement in her backyard, she got up to peer out the window; nobody, probably one of the local cats. At eight o'clock she saved her work, stood to stretch, and decided she was very hungry.

The sky was black but flecked with stars. Teri turned off the music and the computer, closed the window and made sure it and others were latched, then pulled on her anorak. She shifted wallet, lipstick, and comb from her shoulder bag to the anorak's belly pocket, collected flashlight and keys, and set off to walk to the Mexican restaurant less than a mile away.

Two blocks along, hearing footsteps behind her, she stopped and turned quickly, catching a blinking adolescent face in the beam of her light. "Mike's friend Bobby, right?"

"Unh, yeah." This one was shorter and solider than Mike, with ponytailed hair and a smear of dark fuzz on his upper lip.

"Were you looking for me?"

"No way. I was just headin' home."

"Good." Teri lowered the light and went on her brisk-paced way to the double doors of Rigoberto's Cantina.

Inside was warmth, chatter, music. Teri took a stool at the bar and ordered a margarita over, with salt.

"Hey, been awhile!" Bartender Dave Ramos brought her drink and an admiring gaze. "You are lookin' *good.* All pink-cheeked and everything," he added, brushing a finger lightly against her face. "Out for a run?"

"Thanks for that *good.* Just a walk, for the fresh air." Dave, probably mid twenties, wore a macho-stud manner contradicted by an ain't-it-ridiculous grin. Teri liked him.

"Hey," he said softly, leaning closer to look at her. "How come I never noticed you got green eyes?"

She blinked and realized she'd come out without her contacts. "My eyes are light-sensitive, so I sometimes wear colored lenses. What's good tonight?"

"You mean besides me? Tamales, like always. Or the carnitas, if you're real hungry. You want to eat here at the bar?"

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"Why not? After I finish this drink and probably one more."

Dave nodded, handed her a menu, and moved off to tend to other thirsty people. When he came back fifteen minutes later with her second drink, he leaned close again. "I'm off at ten tonight. Give you a ride home?"

"If I'm still here."

Dave drove an old Mustang, lovingly restored. He parked in Teri's driveway, saw her to the door, and didn't have much trouble promoting an invitation inside. About an hour later, two glasses of wine and some silly chatter led to a soft kiss, which led to a deeper one, which led inexorably to Dave's warm hand pushing under her clothes to find her breast.

Teri leaned into the touch for a moment, then gently pushed the hand away. "No, Davey." Aunt Lou and Uncle Matt had been loving but stern in laying down the rules for moral behavior; after nearly ten years on her own, she still envisioned the pair of them and Jesus shaking sad heads whenever she went astray. Not that she didn't short-circuit that picture fairly often. But right now her life was complicated enough.

"Really?"

"Sorry, but really."

He drew his mouth down in mock sorrow. "Too bad. But there's always another time, right?"

"Or another girl," she said, grinning to take any sting from her words. "But thanks for the ride."

Teri slept poorly and woke early. With the fridge nearly empty, she ate an orange, drank a cup of coffee, and set off for the working woman's Saturday round: supermarket, drugstore, dry cleaner's. The entire thirty-five-thousand population of Santa Luisa seemed to be on the same run this morning, most of them looking as glum as she felt.

At home, the telephone was silent, the answering machine unblinking. Teri put her purchases away, half wishing that she'd let Dave stay last night, that he was even now sprawled across her unmade bed waiting for her. She'd thought to find ease in this break, the first she'd had from James Worth's attentions since the day he'd interrupted his run to help her replace a radiator hose in her Toyota. But the tension was still there: an ache in the jaw she hadn't realized was clenched, a hitch in her breathing. It was like the waiting-around time on a Forestry Department firefighting team, just before the fire season explodes.

The rest of Saturday dragged past; she ran three miles, read two magazines. Sunday she ran four miles, went to the laundromat, cleaned her sparsely furnished house. The neighborhood was

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quiet, lots of adolescents, mostly boys, hanging about but nobody making any trouble.

When the telephone rang Sunday afternoon, she picked it up only when she heard an unfamiliar voice begin to leave a message. Chuck Bernstein, a computer-science instructor she'd met at work, wondered whether she'd be interested in a concert next weekend by a well-known Baroque music group.

Music was a part of her youth she missed. Deciding she could allow herself this one treat, she agreed to go. Saturday, he said. He'd get the tickets, let her know later about time.

Good heavens, a date. She settled into her most comfortable chair with a pot of tea and a paperback mystery novel, and came back to her own life only when the telephone rang again, just before five o'clock. This time she answered on the second ring.

"Teri, I just got back to town." James, not bothering with identification. "I trust you missed me."

In a way, she had. "I've been busy."

"So have I, and I'm ready for some relaxation. Won't you let me take you out for dinner? Or if you like, I'll pick up something good and bring it over."

Do it and get it over with. "Not here, my house is a mess. But I have to be home early."

"Wonderful! I'll pick you up at seven."

Teri shaved her legs, showered, gave her hair a touch-up dark rinse. At six-thirty she poured herself a glass of chardonnay and began to dress, in a flared dark skirt and a silky white blouse, with dark hose and black ballet-slipper flats. She smoothed her hair into a twist, applied lipstick, eyeliner, and shadow. Put in her contacts. Raised her glass to her image in the mirror. "The devil we know, and the ones we don't—to hell with them all."

When the doorbell rang at ten to seven, Teri stepped outside with coat on, pulling the door shut behind her. James, in gray slacks and blue blazer, cocked an amused eyebrow and took a firm grip on her elbow, to guide her to his BMW.

"We have a reservation at L'Etoile," he told her. "I think you'll like it."

L'Etoile was the most expensive and reputedly the best restaurant in Santa Luisa. While waiters and the wine man, whatever he was called, and the bread-and-ice-water boy hovered and murmured, Teri made an inward vow not to be intimidated.

James ordered for both of them and then talked of his trip to Sacramento and his work as a CPA. Teri sipped champagne, nibbled at pâté (good) and caviar (not), spooned up shellfish in broth, drank a little cabernet, and ate every bite of rare lamb medallions on creamy risotto.

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When the dessert tray was presented, she shook her head, took a sip of very good coffee, and waited until James's chocolate mousse was in front of him.

"James. Thank you for a wonderful meal."

James picked up a spoon and tasted the mousse, then looked at her with a broad smile that showed lots of large white teeth. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. There'll be many more."

"No."

His spoon hit the dish with a *ching* that brought glances from the next table.

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry you feel a—romantic interest in me, because I can't return it. I haven't been able to make that clear in other ways, so I'm telling you straight out."

Face an ugly red, James lifted his napkin to his lips with a hand that shook. He took two deep breaths of his own, put the napkin down, and signaled for the check. As Teri pushed her chair back, he snapped, "Stay where you are. I will take you home."

It really wasn't a good place for a scene; and she did need a ride home. The check was paid, her coat was presented. The valet brought the car. Teri let herself be handed in, wishing she'd stopped in that fancy restaurant to pee. Without a word James pulled smoothly away from the curb, headed toward her neighborhood.

And stopped, not on a dark street as she'd feared, but in front of Rigoberto's.

"What . . . ?"

"This is a favorite place of yours, I believe? I think we should end the evening with a drink."

The Cantina looked familiar and friendly. Teri got out of the car on her own and led the way inside to the bar. "Two margaritas, over," James said to the bartender. "That's right, isn't it?" he asked Teri.

"Fine." The bartender mixing the drinks was an older man, Miguel. When he set the glasses on napkins before them, Teri said, "Where's Dave? He usually works Sunday."

"Oh, you didn't hear? Dave, he got the shit—Excuse me, Miss Teri. Dave got beat up last night by this bunch of gringo punks, kids. He's gonna be okay," he added quickly, as he saw her reaction. "Got his nose broke and some teeth knocked loose, the rest is just bruises. What hurt him most, they smashed his car with baseball bats."

He reached across the bar and patted her hand. "I'll tell him you asked after him." Someone at the other end of the bar called, and he moved away.

Teri turned just her head to look at James. His narrowed eyes gleamed, and his tight smile hid all those teeth.

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"You? What is *wrong* with you?"

"I feel sure you didn't willingly let him into your house Friday night; you've never even let *me* in. I know you had sex with him, but I believe he forced you. You need someone to take care of you."

"You're crazy! Davey is a nice, good-looking guy who wouldn't force himself on anybody; he can get all the girls he wants!"

He took hold of her left forearm and squeezed so hard she thought she felt the bones grind together. "Not mine."

Reaching out blindly with her right hand, Teri swept up her full glass and flung it at him. "Get away! *Get away!*"

The bartender vaulted over the bar, a surprising act for a man not young; he wrapped an arm around Teri while several waiters converged on James, who was palming liquid and ice from his face and hair.

"He's crazy! Get him away from me!"

Hands high, James backed to the doors, bumped one open, and disappeared.

"Miss?" Miguel squeezed her shoulder. "You all right?"

Not very. "I'm sorry for the fuss." She stepped free of him, and realized she needed to get to the bathroom fast. "Would you please call me a cab?"

Teri had the cabbie drop her off on the street behind her own, and was slipping silently between buildings toward her cottage when she saw a figure ahead, beside her back fence. Tall enough to be James . . .

A shaft of light from a window glanced off orange hair. Suddenly remembering the hovering teenagers of the weekend, she hurried after this one in her soft slippers and reached him just as he sensed something and began to turn.

"Wha . . . ? Ow! Shit, you're breaking my arm!"

"Down," she said through her teeth, and gave the armlock a twist as she hooked a foot around his ankle. "Or the elbow goes."

He fell to his knees and then forward, Teri moving with him and planting a knee on his back. "What are you—Ow!—some kind of nut?"

"The kind of nut you don't want to screw around with." A reminder with the elbow brought a moan from Mike. "You and your buddies stay away from me and my windows, hear?"

"We didn't do nothin'. Hey, it's a free world."

Teri slapped the back of his head, hard. "When I tell all the guys at Rigoberto's who it was beat up Davey Ramos and his car, you'll find out how free the world is."

Mike groaned and Teri felt his long body abandon resistance. "And the man who paid you won't be any help at all." She released him and sprang to her feet, stepping well clear. "Believe it."

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He stayed where he was; she moved past him and hurried to her own empty porch and locked front door.

". . . you'll have to change your mind, because I love you so much."

Teri's jolt of fear faded as she realized James's voice was coming from the answering machine. She closed and locked the door, hung up her coat, went into the bedroom to strip off muddy slippers, dirt-streaked skirt, ruined pantyhose. Her blouse was damp; some of the margarita must have splashed her.

". . . public humiliation, but I forgive you because I know God meant us for each other . . ."

In flannel nightgown, quilted robe, and slippers with woolly linings, Teri scrubbed her face and brushed her teeth. When she turned off the water, James's voice was still there; she looked in the bathroom mirror and saw not her own reflection but Davey Ramos's straight nose and beautiful teeth.

James was still ranting as she unplugged the phone from the wall. No more, not tonight.

Monday morning James sent an enormous box of candy to the office, for "Teri and all her friends." Later in the day came a bouquet of balloons that nearly filled the office. When one of them popped, Maggie Kline screamed.

At home, Teri found a valentine in her mailbox: a fat heart made of padded red felt, with a tiny knife plunged deep into the felt and strands of red yarn streaming bloodlike from the cut. In the house, she set the monstrosity on the telephone table and plugged the telephone in, and James was with her via the answering machine within half an hour. He loved her to death. She was pushing him to the brink of insanity, would have to hold herself responsible for any acts he committed.

Tuesday was blessedly quiet at the office until the early afternoon delivery of a large cake, colorful frosting-drawn figures dancing on its flat white surface. As Carol approached with hungry eyes and a knife, Teri realized that the figures were not exactly dancing.

Carol looked, too, and dropped the knife. "My God! Porno cake!"

That evening, Teri huddled in her armchair sipping sour-tasting wine while a sometimes-sobbing James told her he loved her and described in detail the things he planned to do to her and with her. The phrases quickly assumed a surreal ordinariness, something like "slide tab A into slot B."

After a pause—for God knew what purpose and Teri didn't want to—he said very clearly, "Understand me. If anyone else tries to have you, he'll be sorry."

Teri broke the phone connection, left the receiver off, rewound

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the message tape, and then turned off the answering machine. Receiver back in place, the phone began to ring at once. In a moment of respite after more than twenty rings, she made a quick call to nice Chuck Bernstein, to tell him she'd be unable to attend the concert Saturday. Then she unplugged the phone.

"Don't bother taking your coat off!" snapped Maggie Kline.

More than an hour late to work after a sleepless night, Teri peered around the office, saw a shiny cardboard box on each desk, hunched her shoulders. "What?"

Edith, the oldest of the clerks, looked as if she might cry. With a rustle of tissue paper, Carol flourished a pair of filmy red panties in one hand, a matching bra in the other. "Nipple cut-outs, open crotch," she remarked cheerfully. "Unfortunately, too small for me."

"I'm sorry," Teri said. "I swear I've done nothing to encourage this man."

"You're on unpaid leave until you get your life straightened out. Assuming you can do that," Maggie Kline added.

At the police department a blond and buffed young cop took her complaint: personal details about her and, so far as she knew them, her alleged harasser; specific incidents of harassment; her responses to these incidents. When she produced her message tape, he put it on a machine and listened.

And then sighed. "Sounds like one sick puppy. Thing is, our justice system really isn't set up to deal with this kind of problem."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ms. Gowan, we—you—basically have two options. We can talk to the guy, point out he's heading for trouble. Since he apparently leads an otherwise stable life, he may decide to knock it off."

"May?"

"If he keeps it up, we go to court for a restraining order; he violates that, maybe he gets some jail time, more likely probation. Some people think this is the right approach. Others, and this is my view, think it just makes the guy mad and doesn't change his behavior except maybe for the worse."

"So if he doesn't rape or kill me, there's nothing I can do except something that might push him into raping or killing me."

Officer Burdett looked offended. "The other option I was about to mention, probably your best bet, honestly, would be to move away. Especially since you don't have family or long-term connections here."

"That's it?" Teri's sleep-deprived eyes filled with tears.

"Ms. Gowan, we can go for a restraining order. It's your call."

"Thanks a lot," said Teri as she got to her feet.

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Burdett got up as well, to see her to the door. "I'm sorry. I'll talk to the guy, okay? Then you can decide where you want to take it."

An older uniformed man sitting at a desk across the room called out, "Hey, ma'am? I'd get a gun."

"We don't recommend that," said Burdett quickly. "A dog, maybe."

"Woof woof," said Teri.

Lunchtime, but she wasn't hungry; she went back to the campus and spent the afternoon in the library, working quietly on her laptop. By the time it began to get dark she was ready for food and drove downtown to a Thai place she liked.

Well fed but still edgy, she headed not for home but for a nearby multiplex movie theater, where she bought one ticket and managed to see two movies. It was close to one A.M. when she put her car away in the garage at the cottage.

She unlocked the kitchen door, closed it behind her, dropped bag and coat on a chair, and hurried to the bathroom. Even as she reached for the light switch she knew someone had been there.

The lid of the toilet seat, which she always left down, was up, the bowl full of brown water, the tile floor sticky under her shoes. Holding her breath, she pulled a strip of toilet paper from the roller and used it to shield her fingers as she pushed the flush lever.

Cabinet doors and drawers were ajar, water trickling from the sink faucet. On the edge of the sink a red toothbrush lay wetly in a puddle of toothpaste. He'd used her toothbrush! She picked it up with thumb and finger and dropped it in the wastebasket.

Teri washed her hands with soap, then wet the hand towel and scrubbed it over the soles of her shoes before moving out of the bathroom to stand in the hall and listen. She heard no human sound, had no sense of any presence.

In her bedroom, her lingerie drawer stood open, its contents spilling out. Several things—a couple of pretty nightgowns, a lacy black half-slip and matching chemise, three or four pairs of panties—were wadded up in the middle of her bed, which looked as if it, and the lingerie, had been rolled on.

The small second bedroom looked undisturbed. Teri knelt beside the daybed, thrust a hand under the mattress, and sighed with relief. She pulled out the small red-leather book just to be sure, then replaced it and smoothed the bed cover.

A chair stood askew at her dining table, before a scatter of crumbs and a crumpled paper napkin. In the living room her favorite chair and ottoman had been moved across the room; there were flecks of mud on the ottoman and the carpet. Everything in the room—books in the bookcase, magazines, pictures on the wall—looked somehow *off*.

In the kitchen, she saw nothing amiss until she opened the

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refrigerator to find a bottle of champagne—the same French champagne they'd drunk Sunday night.

Teri eyed the silent telephone and decided that tomorrow would be soon enough to talk to the police. She put on rubber gloves and scrubbed the bathroom; then she took a quilt into the second bedroom and curled up on the daybed and slept.

Next morning, Teri scrubbed the bathroom again before showering. The telephone began to ring as soon as she plugged it in; she unplugged it, had a quick cup of coffee, and drove to the police station.

Burdett got quickly to his feet as she approached his desk. "Ms. Gowan, we've been trying to call you. Our records show that—"

"About a year ago—before Officer Burdett's time—another young woman from your neighborhood came in with a complaint against James Worth." The speaker was a bulky, graying man whose nametag identified him as Sergeant Dennis Malloy. "She looked quite a bit like you, smaller maybe."

"What did he do to her?"

"She said he pursued her constantly, drove away her music students, and cost her her job playing cello with our regional symphony orchestra."

"Did she get a restraining order?"

"She chose to move away," said Burdett.

"She was a quiet little thing, and real spooked," Malloy added.

Teri gave her attention to the older man. "Did he ever hurt her physically?"

Burdett said, "The department can't comment on . . ."

"Not long after she talked to us," said Malloy, "we got a call from a neighbor, what sounded like trouble at the victim's house. Patrol got there and found her alone, bruised and bleeding, clothes torn. She just kept crying and saying she didn't know what had happened. Refused to be taken to the hospital. Next day she was gone."

Teri sat down in the nearest chair, clutching her shoulder bag in front of her like a shield. " 'Spooked' is about right. James Worth got into my house last night."

Half an hour later the two policemen prowled the cottage. The only fingerprints on doorknobs, window latches, and refrigerator door were Teri's, mostly smeared. None at all on the champagne bottle. In the bedroom, the three of them viewed the disordered bed.

"Probably masturbated, wearing a condom," said Malloy. "And tossed it in the toilet," he added glumly.

Teri had already defended her cleaning of the bathroom.

"And you're sure you locked up?" asked Burdett.

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"I *told* you. He must have gotten keys somewhere." Teri's voice wobbled, and her eyes filled with tears.

"So we'll check the key shops," said Malloy. "What we need is a big fat piece of evidence proving the intruder was Worth."

"Yesterday," said Burdett, "Mr. Worth told me you and he were lovers who'd had a little misunderstanding."

"What he said last time," growled Malloy. "I'll see him today, Miss Gowan. And I strongly suggest you make application for a restraining order."

"I'll—think about it." Teri found a tissue in a pocket and wiped her eyes. "Yes, I'll do it. But not today."

Malloy sighed. "Right. Well, it'd be a good idea to get your locks changed."

"Teri, I know your touch-me-not behavior is just your own kind of foreplay. Like my anger at the lies you're telling. I love imagining the things you'll do to appease me, soon."

As if he might detect her presence, Teri stood motionless. When she heard the hang-up click, she continued her survey of the cottage. All windows latched, curtains drawn, lights off except for the twenty-five-watt bulb in the garage. In the long mirror on the closet door she was more shadow than reflection: black pants and sweater and shoes, froth of hair tucked under a dark stocking cap. She pulled on a navy wool jacket and went out the kitchen door to the garage. Moments later she drove off into the gathering dusk, leaving the garage door up.

At two-ten A.M. by the luminous numerals on the microwave oven, sounds of movement came from the garage. A key rattled faintly in the lock, the kitchen door opened, and a tall figure with a misshapen head was silhouetted there. The door closed; feet squeaked on the floor; the green numerals disappeared and reappeared.

When light burst into the room like a silent explosion, the figure spun around and froze, arms wide. "Aaugh!" With a yellow plastic shower cap hiding his hair, Worth's big face looked doughy. "Where's your car?"

"A mile away with a flat tire. *Sit down!* On the floor against the fridge." Astride a reversed straight chair in the doorway between kitchen and dining area, Teri rested her forearms on the chair's back, her right hand holding a short-barreled dark revolver.

Eyes on the gun, Worth sat, slowly. "I mean no harm, Teri. While I'm waiting for you to come to the end of your game-playing, I need to be where you've been, touch your things, smell your smell."

"Leave souvenirs?"

"Live with you. Where did a nice girl like you get a gun?"

"I'm the kind of girl that knows how to get guns." He drew his

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legs closer, as if to rise, and she shifted her grip to brace her right wrist with her left hand. "Jenny Lamb was the *nice* girl."

He held his face very still. "Jenny Lamb?"

"Jenny's mother is my mother's half-sister," said Teri, her voice low in her throat. "She took me in after my mom hit the road when I was eight and Jenny was ten. Jenny shared everything with me. I watched out for her and didn't ever let anybody mess with her until she went away to college and I—hit the road."

"I don't see what this has to do with me." He shifted position, and she snapped, "Stay still!

"Last summer," she continued, "it looked like I was really getting my life together, so for the first time in years I called Aunt Lou, to ask for Jenny's address. She told me Jenny had just been shipped home to Chicago in a coffin."

"That must have been sad for you."

"Sad for you, too, you slimy son-of-a-bitch. Aunt Lou asked me to go to Denver and pack up Jenny's apartment, and I found her diary, she always kept a diary. So Jenny herself told me all about James D. Worth of Santa Luisa, California." Her gaze steady on him, she thumbed back the revolver's hammer.

"For Christ's sake, be careful!"

"After you'd ruined her—Isn't that funny? From a different angle, that dumb old word still means pretty much the same thing—after that, she'd started to make a new life in Denver. Then one day she answered her door and there you were. The next day she drove her car off a mountain into a ravine."

"She belonged to me. She shouldn't have run away, either time."

Teri sat a little straighter, feet flat on the floor. "And what about me?"

"You?"

"You've been harassing me. People at work have seen that, and the police know how frightened I am. They told me you stalked Jenny. Raped her."

"She never accused me of rape!"

"Then you turn up in my kitchen in the middle of the night, in latex gloves and a plastic shower cap, with a set of keys to this place in your pocket."

Face reddening, he snatched off the cap he'd apparently forgotten. "You dressed like Jenny, acted like her. You moved to my neighborhood and dangled yourself around me. That's entrapment."

He pulled his feet close again and when she didn't object, he stood up slowly. "Entrapment," he repeated with relish. "When the police find out who you are, they'll arrest *you*. Now give me that gun."

"Who's going to tell them?"

A step closer to her, hand out, he stopped. "What?"

Teri squeezed the trigger. ●

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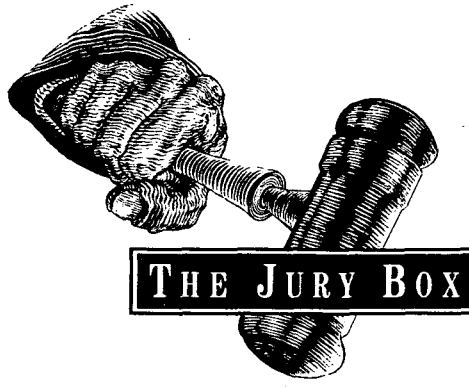

by Jon L. Breen

The first mystery novel to include a selection of recipes was probably Rex Stout's *Too Many Cooks* (1938), in which gourmet detective Nero Wolfe investigates a murder at a gathering of great chefs. To the frustration of cooks and completists, the 23-page recipe section has usually been omitted from reprints, including Bantam's 1993 Rex Stout Library edition. Though the Wolfe saga is full of culinary references, *Too Many Cooks* remains unique in providing formal cooking instructions. Another one-shot novel with recipes was Alexandra Roudybush's *A Gastronomic Murder* (1973), and there may be others. As far as I know, the first writer to include recipes in each volume of a series was Virginia Rich (1914-1985), who introduced senior-citizen sleuth Eugenia Potter in *The Cooking School Murders* (1982), followed by *The Baked Bean Supper Murders* (1983) and *The Nantucket Diet Murders* (1985). The most commercially successful of several writers currently including recipes is Diane Mott Davidson, while the Eugenia Potter series continues under new management.

**** Nancy Pickard: *The Blue Corn Murders,* Delacorte, 1998. Eugenia visits an archaeological tourist camp in Colorado, hoping to find out more about some Indian artifacts found on her Arizona ranch, and encounters a series of murders among staff and guests. Pickard, who fashioned a good mystery out of a fragment left by Rich in *The 27 Ingredient Chile Con Carne Murders* (1993), is apparently less interested in cooking than her posthumous collaborator: the same five recipes appear on both front and rear endpapers, and the plot is not all that much concerned with food. If you consider that bad news, the good news is that Pickard is one of the best contemporary writers of classical mysteries: vivid prose, fully-fleshed characters, and an ingenious plot

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gimmick all come together in a tight, economical whodunit.

*** Diane Mott Davidson: *Prime Cut,* Bantam, $23.95. In her eighth book-length case, small-town Colorado caterer and cop's wife Goldy Bear Schulz helps her old cooking teacher provide food for a mountain fashion shoot and looks into the murder of a deviously incompetent local building contractor. Rather than being gathered in a separate section, the eleven recipes are interspersed throughout the book, with an index at the end. In contrast to Pickard's pointedness, Davidson's narrative wanders all over the place, exemplifying the mystery-novel-as-soap-opera: an endless extended family of continuing secondary characters allows Davidson to spin out a potentially good mystery to almost twice its optimum length. Still, I enjoyed the book—Goldy and her family grew on me, and the final line offers a nice twist. (Note for specialist collectors: with stolen vintage cookbooks a plot element, this is a biblio-mystery as well as a culinary one.)

*** Dennis Lehane: *Gone Baby Gone,* Morrow, $24. Goldy's travails seem positively sitcom-ish compared to the miseries Boston private eyes Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennero go through in the search for a vanished four-year-old girl and complications involving drug dealing, obsessed cops, and colorful crooks. The novel validates the heavy reputation Lehane has acquired for his first three novels: he writes powerful prose and dialogue, produces a well calculated series of surprises, and certainly has something vital to say about how our contemporary society views and treats children. So why do I have reservations? In the formal detective story and even the traditional private eye novel, contrived and artificial are not pejoratives—they come with the territory. But in a story involving maimed and tortured children, sickening crime, and psychologically crippling emotions, the trick is not to make it all seem too calculated and choreographed. My problem with Lehane is that the traditional patterns and P.I. posturings, the bright one-liners and reader manipulations don't fit with the soul-flaying subject matter.

*** Val Davis: *Flight of the Serpent,* Bantam, $5.50. In her second case, archaeologist Nicolette (Nick) Scott witnesses a desert plane crash and helps the pilot's grandfather, World War II flyer John Gaunt, determine what happened and why. Gaunt summons his old crew to fly their B-24 bomber one last time. The story, involving contemporary computer technology as well as vintage aircraft, builds to a thrilling conclusion. It's well-designed for the big screen, offering great parts for older actors, including a leading man of advanced years (Paul Newman or Clint Eastwood maybe?) opposite a younger actress.

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*** Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini: *Duo,* Five Star, P.O. Box 159, Thorndike, ME 04986; $21.95. There have been several husband-and-wife mystery-writing combinations who could have done a collaborative short-story collection (Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy, say, or Margaret Millar and Ross Macdonald), but Muller and Pronzini are the first to actually do it. There are six stories by Muller, two by the authors in collaboration, and six by Pronzini. Eight of the fourteen stories are previously uncollected, and most of the six from earlier collections by one of the writers are among the shorter tales. The authors' attributes are so similar—atmospheric description, Northern California backgrounds, well-etched characters, and total mastery of pace and structure—the book could easily be the work of one hand.

In addition to original short story collections, the new Five Star line, whose handsome unjacketed volumes are directed mainly at the public library market, offers first hardcovers of some outstanding paperback originals. One of Max Allan Collins's best is the 1988 fact-based novel *Butcher's Dozen* ($19.95), in which former Untouchables leader Eliot Ness goes after the 1935 Cleveland serial killer known as the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run. William Bernhardt's 1991 debut *Primary Justice* ($20.95) is the first in the enormously entertaining seriocomic series about Oklahoma lawyer Ben Kincaid.

Also among the reprints are new trade paperback editions from the series about Arthur W. Upfield's Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, the half-Aborigine Australian sleuth whose adventures were an acknowledged inspiration to Tony Hillerman and whom the great critic Anthony Boucher once called his favorite contemporary detective. Best of the group of four is *The Bone is Pointed* (1938), but I can also recommend *Murder Down Under* (British title: *Mr. Jelly's Business,* 1937) and *The Mystery of Swordfish Reef* (1939). All are published by Scribners at $11, and all include a new introduction by Edward Marston —unfortunately, it's the same introduction in each of the four books.

Leonard Maltin's *1999 Movie & Video Guide* (Plume, $19.95) is the latest in an annual series with which most movie buffs are acquainted. It has special value for mystery fans in its closely-packed double-columned pages: the most extensive and knowledgeable film-by-film coverage extant (at least in one volume) of all the great movie mystery series, from the Thin Man, Philo Vance, Charlie Chan, Nancy Drew, and Ellery Queen to Dirty Harry and Inspector Clouseau. The newest edition includes among its 19,000 entries crime films as recent as 1998's *Twilight.*

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Art by Allen Davis

THE FINAL CHANCE

by David Williams

James Ratkin-Finch was my last resort, my very last resort. I hadn't intended to kill him either, well, not when I got there. It was because of the way he treated me—something that hadn't altered one bit since my schooldays.

Ratfink, which is what the boys, and a good many staff members, called him, had been my housemaster at Gorelake, a boarding school in Surrey. It wasn't one of the posher English private schools—or "public" schools as they're misnamed to the confusion of most foreigners. And, again, unlike Eton, Winchester, and the others, Gorelake didn't date back to the dark ages either. It was founded in the 1880s, intentionally to educate the male offspring of not overly well-off parents posted overseas in the then far-flung British Empire. So far as Gorelake was concerned, it seems that the female offspring of the same families were to be left to fend for themselves; but then, that was in the nineteenth century.

The original investors in Gorelake must have calculated that most of the school fees would be paid as "extra staff benefits" by Queen Victoria's armed services—the country's largest overseas

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employer. My father, for instance, was a regular soldier in the Royal Engineers, where he eventually rose to the rank of staff sergeant. He was never made an officer, but was a sought-after specialist all the same—in the practical aspects of bridge building.

My mother had died having me, their only child, in an upcountry Malaysian hospital where officially she shouldn't have been at the time in any case. My birth was something for which my father would never forgive me: I learned that much at a very tender age. He never remarried either. Instead, he immersed himself in his work. He applied for one overseas posting after another, some of them official secondments to friendly foreign governments, to territories where frequent wars—mostly civil ones—made bridge building, or rebuilding, a major strategic preoccupation for the most recently victorious faction.

David Williams's latest series of mystery novels, featuring Welsh policeman Chief Inspector Merlin Parry, is receiving spectacular reviews in the U.K. Raved one reviewer of *Terminal Case* (HarperCollins, 1997): "Superbly written, with a depth of feeling rare in crime fiction." Although the series has no U.S. publisher, interested readers can find the British editions at most bookstores. ✝

Up to my reaching boarding-school age, I was passed from one grandmother, aunt, or older cousin to another, with increasing ill grace on all sides. I was a difficult child from the start, and didn't become any less so as the result of being farmed out to a series of reluctant relatives.

So everyone was relieved when, at six years and eight months, I was packed off to Gorelake, whose junior school accepted boys at that age. For an extra fee, the establishment also housed and fed its pupils through the Christmas and Easter holidays, and even made arrangements for them to be looked after in the long summer vacation, too. While this was a facility the school had been providing from the beginning, it had continued with it after the Second World War for reasons mostly to do with its own economic survival. In short, Gorelake found it profitable to go on offering holiday accommodation after other schools dropped it—when air travel was enabling loved ones to be brought together quickly. Needless to say, this last and desirable piece of social evolution had been studiously ignored by my father, though it was steadfastly quoted by my other relatives as the reason why he should be responsible for me during vacations—an idea he flatly never accepted.

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It was Gorelake that continued to get my father off the hook, on a long-term basis, with the British army footing most of the bill. It was also why Ratkin-Finch first came into my life.

At Christmas and Easter the junior school's earnest headmaster and his scrawny wife cared for the pathetic handful of pupils of all ages who had nowhere else to go. The couple shouldered the chore, I suspect, only for the extra income it earned them personally. The atmosphere during the holidays was more like that of an orphanage than that of a private school—though the difference would not have been all that marked at any time.

So, at first blush, Ratkin-Finch came as a blessed relief to me when, after my first year at Gorelake, I was turned over, with eight others, to his especial care for the summer hols. In a sense it was a sort of promotion for me. After all, I was in the Junior School while he taught geography in the Big School, and was a housemaster there. Where the Junior School headmaster was weedy and studious, the inappropriately named Ratfink was a huge, burly blond bachelor, who, despite middle age, was a pillar of strength, energy, and spiritual zeal. He ran the Gorelake summer holiday camp for us otherwise abandoned pupils as though there was nothing else in the world he would rather be doing through half of July and all of August every year.

That first time we traveled by train, bus, and, for the last mile and a half, on foot, to the banks of a remote Scottish loch. It was a pattern I was to get used to over the coming years, along with transporting tents, sleeping bags, quite sophisticated cooking utensils—including a portable stove (Ratfink was keen on his food)—prayer books (he conducted a daily chapel), and clothing suitable for all seasons. This last was because while the campsites changed each summer, they had it in common that they seemed to be even more subject to the vagaries of the British weather than most other places. Which is how I contracted viral pneumonia.

Ratfink was a "strength through misery" fanatic when it came to facing up to the elements—meaning thunder, lightning, gale-force winds, and torrential rain for days on end. "Making men of you all" was his often-stated objective. For my part, being not yet eight years of age, I was far from contemplating imminent manhood, and was much more concerned with my, for me, shameful, enduring bouts of infantile bed-wetting.

My inclination to hero-worship our leader evaporated on the second night when all the tents blew down, and he had us huddled together in our sleeping bags in the lee of an inadequate boulder, instead of finding the means to transport us back to civilisation and hot baths. Next day we fed off soggy bread and cold baked beans, while toughing it out till the wind and rain abated, playing

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boisterous games, climbing hills, and even swimming in the freezing loch. Later, while there was still no sun, there was an improvement in the weather, so that we got the tents up again and the stove functioning.

I was physically a tall, willowy weakling, naturally pale, underweight, subject to coughing bouts and lacking in energy—nothing there, according to Ratfink, that couldn't be cured by exposure to fresh air and healthy living. I wasn't a whiner, though, not at that point—which is why my illness wasn't noticed until I collapsed halfway up a hill on day five and was hurried off to hospital in an ambulance, "just to be on the safe side," Ratfink explained defensively at the time. He was far from sure that there was anything really wrong with me, even after pneumonia was firmly diagnosed. I'd had flu in the previous spring and had never got rid of the bronchitic aftermath, bronchitis being something that hadn't responded to syrup of figs, the Junior School remedy for all ills.

The following year, far from my being turned down by Ratfink as a candidate for his summer camp, he couldn't have been keener to have me along, I suspect because he was convinced I'd been shamming illness before and needed to be taught a lesson in manliness. You'd have thought that my collapse when previously in his charge might have prompted some responsible relative to demand that I shouldn't have to run a similar risk again; but not a bit of it.

My middle-aged, spinster Aunt Deirdre, who lived in Surrey and managed a small sweet shop, wasn't a particularly responsible relative. She was just the closest geographically to Gorelake. She took me in for a few days at the end of term, but was soon seeing me off—this time to mountainous North Wales—from London's Euston Station, under the Ratfink wing. She remarked to him, when they met on the platform, how well I'd recovered from the pneumonia. He gave a guarded grunt to that. Anything more would have meant acknowledging that I'd really been ill. "Pity about the bed-wetting still," Aunt Deirdre had added, in the full hearing of three other older boys.

"Bed-wetting, you say? There are ways of curing that, of course," Ratfink had replied confidently, the now broadcasted news of my demeaning weakness being fresh to him because I had been careful to cover up evidence of it in the previous year: We campers looked after our own bedding, whereas at school there were housemaids for such potentially revealing chores.

"I know there must be ways of curing it," my aunt had responded, without, I'm sure, accepting that love, affection, and a regular home life figured prominently amongst them. Ratfink's remedy consisted of my taking a foul-tasting homeopathic relaxing tablet each night, going to the camp latrine before *and* after I

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undressed, repeating to myself, "I will not wet my bed tonight," ten times before going to sleep, then saying a prayer about it. Finally, I had to keep a battery-operated alarm that Ratfink had posted to him at the camp under my legs in my sleeping bag. The alarm went off when it got wet—and often, as I discovered, when it didn't get wet. None of this did anything to alleviate my occasional affliction, while the unreliable alarm would have ensured that I didn't get a proper night's sleep for the whole holiday—except that after three nights I kept it switched off. I told Ratfink that I was completely cured. It was the first lie I ever told him, and because it reflected well on him, he swallowed it whole.

"There you are, young Chivers," he boomed in response, "only took a bit of effort on your part, didn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Next thing is to teach you to hold a cricket bat straight. Make a man of you yet, won't we?"

"Yes, sir."

I hated cricket. I was once hit hard on the nose by a cricket ball, and in any case I was no good at games.

I didn't move up to the Big School until I was nearly fourteen—more than a year after my contemporaries. This was because I had lagged behind them all in reading, and thus in every other subject except woodwork. Nor had there been family cries of protest that the school had failed to *teach* me to read, or questions about whether I might be dyslexic—I wasn't, but it might have been worth proving the point. So far as I know, my father, who was on secondment in Pakistan around that time, might have been planning on my becoming a carpenter: It's possible.

By this time, I had come to live in fear and trembling of Ratfink, who, for six successive summers, had been attempting to overcome my weaknesses in body, mind, and spirit with his purported morally and physically uplifting regimens. It was as though he had dedicated himself to turning me into a joint candidate for the Olympics and holy orders—an ambition, he divined, which could be better realised if I was under his direction all through the year. This is why I was put into his house.

The more evidently I failed to match up to Ratfink's ambitions for me, the more zealous he became in their cause. This brought out a kind of defensive streak in me, which eventually I honed into a talent for cunning and deceit—the basis, probably, of my subsequent criminal career. I make no bones about this.

I was effectively an orphan forced to fend for himself from a very early age. Although this had prompted me to develop native guile, I had limited academic ability, remained physically weak, and had no financial means. Although my school fees were paid for, I was allowed very little pocket money. This was why I began thieving.

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I nicked small amounts of money and insignificant but saleable things from other boys, but mostly from Ratfink's study and his bedroom. I had been doing this for over a year before he or his housekeeper—he wasn't married—realised that there was a thief about the place. To counter Ratfink's aim to turn me into a pious cherub, I had got my agnostic father to write to the headmaster that I was to be excused morning chapel on religious grounds—because my mother had been Jewish. It was one of the few useful things Father ever did for me. The development was a shock for Ratfink, but one he could do little about.

As the only pupil allegedly of the Jewish faith in the whole school, I was set to read from the Scriptures by myself in the house common room while chapel was on, an arrangement that gave me the run of the building for twenty minutes every weekday morning, and for over an hour on Sundays.

It was on a Sunday that Ratfink caught me in his bathroom. I was lifting a pack of razor cartridges from the storage cupboard, in which he kept about a year's supply of everything, when he walked in on me.

"Excused myself from chapel, too, this morning, Chivers," he said, standing four-square in the doorway. "In a worthy cause, it seems. So it's you who's been robbing us. Shame on you."

I either had to suffer a beating from him then and there, or be taken before the headmaster. There was really no option. I was pretty sure the headmaster would have chucked me out of the school. Although I hated the place, it was the devil I knew. A fresh school could have been worse.

In fact, I was surprised that Ratfink took such lenient action, although he did seem to get his pound of flesh out of it. The corporal punishment was preceded by a five-minute lecture intended to have me shedding tears of shame and contrition—so I let it, as I thought, to give Ratfink some self-satisfaction and maybe reduce the severity of what was coming next. The beating was administered with a birch cane. He gave me five hard swipes on my bare bottom: Allowing for the calculated mitigation, I had still expected six. I'm pretty sure that was what Ratfink had intended as well, except, after the fifth stroke, he dropped the cane, turned away, and told me to pull up my trousers. Then he had us both on our knees reciting, in unison, the general confession from the prayer book. He seemed to have forgotten I had changed my religion, and I didn't remind him. He was so fervent with his praying, it sounded as though he felt more in need of forgiveness than I was.

But it was after that day that Ratfink turned against me—disowned me, if you like. He'd pick on me, make me look stupid, show me up in front of others, in class, at games, in the house, really needling me whenever he got the chance, in the main for being a

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moral, academic, and physical failure. With my background, his new attitude didn't hurt me that much, it just surprised me. It was as if he regretted having let me off lightly with a beating when he could have had me expelled from the school—and out of his life.

I never stole again. But it wasn't because of the beating. I'd hit on a bigger and better source of income.

Around the same time that I was caught by Ratfink, two slightly older boys really were expelled for smoking pot. The headmaster solemnly addressed the whole school to say he was satisfied his prompt action in getting rid of the boys had eliminated a source of great evil in our midst before it had taken root. I figured his action hadn't done anything of the sort, because I happened to know the two had not just been smoking the stuff, they'd been trading in it, satisfying a need which would now require filling by someone else. I struck while the iron was hot, contacted one of the boys at his home, and, for a consideration, got the name of their supplier in the local town. I was in business the following weekend.

At the time, I didn't think there was much harm in cannabis. That was before I let one thing lead to another. It was through that first contact that I moved on to dealing in more expensive stuff. Nobody in authority at Gorelake found out that I was into drug pushing till my last term, and even then nothing was proved. It was Ratfink again who nearly caught me—did catch me, really, selling ecstasy tablets to another boy in the changing room of the school gym, except I was too quick for him. I saw him bearing down on us with the glint of victory in his beady eye.

"Stay where you are, Chivers," he bawled. "I want you."

I grabbed the tablets back from the boy, raced into the loos at the back of the building, locked myself in a cubicle, and flushed the stuff away. Ratfink even climbed over the partition with the intention of stopping me, but only after he'd wasted precious time trying to force the doorlock.

I took the initiative then, came the high horse, and said I'd tell the headmaster that Ratfink had chased me into the loo in a frenzy, but for no reason I could fathom, making me run for dear life after screaming, "I want you, I want you," at the top of his voice—and in front of a witness for whom I'd only been changing a five-pound note. That would have left it to the headmaster to draw whatever nasty conclusions he chose. The ploy worked.

From then on, of course, Ratfink redoubled his efforts to get me. He failed, mostly because there was so little time left, and I was extra careful. Three weeks later, on my last day at the school, he called me into his study.

"Chivers," he said, "I've dealt with a lot of ungrateful, dishonest,

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and stupid boys in my time. Nearly all of them had some redeeming features, but you have none. And no scholastic qualifications, either."

"I may get some A Levels, sir," I put in. National exam results were never announced till the following month.

"I doubt it, Chivers. I seriously doubt it," he replied. "You've let me down. When you came to the school, and then into my house, I was ready to befriend you, knowing your background, and so on." He looked out of the window, as though the view there was more comforting than the sight of me. "But you spurned my friendship," he went on. "And worse than that, you've been involved in criminal activities. We both know what I mean."

"Not really, sir," I answered, all innocence.

"Nonsense. You know well enough and that makes you a liar into the bargain." He shook his head. "I don't know what you'll do for a career, and despite your attitude, that worries me. Perhaps I can help—"

"I'm going into the entertainment business, sir," I interrupted quickly, before he could start arranging a place for me as a gardener's apprentice in some municipal park—it was the kind of thing he'd offered to other, what he called, misfits.

He turned back to me with a glower. The entertainment business could have meant a lot of things—and the ones he was thinking of were all obviously unsavoury. His face remained clouded until he made up his mind not to enquire any further about my career plans. "Crime doesn't pay, Chivers. Not in the end. Try to lead an honest life from now on. Don't bring shame on yourself, your family, and your school, which is what'll happen if you don't go straight. Apart from anything else, you'd be bound to get found out. Remember I told you as much. That's all. Goodbye."

He didn't shake hands with me, and the look in his eye seemed to indicate he never wanted to see me again. He was right about the A Levels. I didn't get any. Not one. It didn't stop me telling future employers I'd got four, at high grades. Nobody ever asks to see the certificates. In any case, my first job was lined up—as a trainee manager in a disco company where Bert Pinker, a cousin of my father's, was in charge of accounting and recruitment. He'd never helped me in any other way, and, like a lot of my relatives, I think that made him feel guilty.

The company had six disco halls, all in London. Straight off, I had to get to know them so that I could step in as management support during illness or holidays. Wearing a secondhand dinner jacket, I had to answer customers' questions in what Bert had stressed to the owner was my authoritative private-school accent, make sure people were decently dressed, spot the drunks, see there was no drug taking or pushing (ho! ho!), relieve the disc

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jockey for spells during the evening, and check the box office and bar tills with the managers at closing time.

The pay was lousy and the job didn't exactly offer glittering prospects, but, as you may have deduced, in one brilliant move I'd got the exclusive drug-selling rights to a few thousand young punters—a task for which I was already well qualified. What's more, I exercised my instructions to keep all drug pushers away from my discos with a positive and often-commended dedication. Altogether, I couldn't have asked for a better deal. Within twelve months I'd made a hundred times my official salary out of my sideline.

The pity of it was, I got careless. Halfway into my second year, I sold some heroin to a plainclothes policewoman. Pretty thing, she was, and flirty with it, until she slapped the handcuffs on me.

Because it was a first offence, although I had to pay a hefty fine, I was only sent to jail for six months, and was excused two of them for good behaviour. Naturally, second cousin Bert disowned me after that, so, when I was freed, there were no more jobs from that quarter. I forged a reference from him all the same, and on the strength of that, the dinner jacket, my posh voice, and my fictitious A Levels, got a place as an assistant manager with a cinema-and-pizza chain in the north of England. Of course, I should have seen the light then, and gone straight. Despite the fine, I'd managed to stash away a bit of a nest egg. But soon after starting in the new job I came to realise that it was almost as good as discos for carrying on the business I really preferred.

The judge was harder on me the second time.

Yes, I'm afraid there was a second time—and a third, and a fourth, as a matter of fact. No matter how careful I was, I seemed always to get caught. By the time I was thirty-five, I'd already done five years behind bars. My marriage had foundered by that time as well.

But it was then that I got the break. My father was killed when a bridge he was supposed to be mending fell into the river somewhere in Somalia. He hadn't made a will, so, after a lot of legalities, his whole estate, including some insurance money, came to me, because, even though he'd effectively abandoned me, I was still his nearest, if not exactly his dearest, relative. My total inheritance came to just over £80,000, which, after some persuasion, I invested in a half share of a run-down backstreet pub in Earls Court, a part of west London that was being rejuvenated. The pub was screaming to be modernised and turned into the kind of spot where well-heeled young executives could get a drink, a meal, live music, and dancing at weekends, at reasonable prices. I recognised the potential in the place the moment I was taken to see it. And it was the sort of legitimate business I'd come to under-

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stand—as well as the sort I should have switched to seriously long before this. The idea was that I should manage the enterprise when we reopened it.

My partner in all this was Gregory Elliott-Smythe, a highly qualified accountant, very conservative sort of chap, a bit older than me, who looked a professional right down to his fingertips. He'd given up his accounting practice to devote himself to property and business development, working with different investment partners, like me, who had expertise in different fields. Fiona told me all this. It was she who introduced me to Gregory. She was a temporary secretary with the law firm who handled the legalities on my father's estate. That's how I'd met her. She was quite a looker, and she was also crazy about me.

It was Fiona who'd advised me to take Gregory's advice on how to use my newfound wealth. She knew the law firm had processed a lot of successful business for him over many years, and she'd heard the senior partner say that Elliott-Smythe was the shrewdest money man he'd met in his whole life, and that he'd go far.

Gregory went far, all right, probably to somewhere like Hawaii, a few days after getting his hands on my money—and Fiona went with him. They were a couple of con artists. Later, I discovered that the law firm had never even heard of him. He'd used a different outfit to legalise our partnership.

If there was any time in my life when I was entitled to feel hard done by, this was it. The idea of going straight had turned into a sour dream for me. I was dead broke. What money I'd had, apart from the "invested" inheritance, I'd blown on giving Fiona a good time. There was no relative I could turn to, and, all of a sudden, I didn't seem to have any friends. As I said at the start, that was why I went to see Ratfink.

I rang the school, but the headmaster's secretary explained that Mr. Ratkin-Finch had retired two years before this. After I told her my name was Henry Roberts, an old boy of the school, she gave me Ratfink's address. Something told me not to use my own name. Henry Roberts was a real person: He'd been at school with me, and had gone on to be a clergyman.

The address was in Brighton, on the south coast. I had to hitchhike there: I was that hard up. It was mid January, and raining.

Ratfink lived alone in a terrace of small, recently gentrified, two-storey houses with no front gardens, but each rendered in contrasting pastel shades of biscuit, pink, or cream. The street was at the back of the town, though with a view of the sea if you stretched your neck.

"Come in, Chivers," he said, immediately on opening the door. It was as if he'd been expecting me. There was no other greeting, no

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smile, or—more predictably—frown of recognition. Yet he hadn't set eyes on me for over eighteen years. "Leave that wet coat there," he ordered, indicating a mahogany hall stand, as he led the way down the narrow, carpeted passage.

The room I followed him into was more or less a replica of his study at school, but on a smaller scale. I recognised the pictures, and the pieces of silver and bric-à-brac—in particular, four matching George the Second candlesticks, two Russian icons, a gold-handled Indian dagger encrusted with rubies, and his collection of carved ivories. There was also a small, valuable Victorian painting: an Edwin Landseer. This showed a stag and some hounds by a bubbling brook, on a hillside covered with heather. The hounds were having a ball, while the stag was bleeding to death: not exactly my style of wall decoration, but we'd always been told it was worth a mint. Ratfink's father had been a diplomat and had collected most of the stuff on his travels—except for the Landseer, which had belonged to his mother.

"You've been . . . at liberty again, for a while," he said. "Four to five months, is it?" It was only half a question, as if he knew the answer close enough already. As it happened, he'd been dead right. He'd sat himself behind his desk. I took the seat on the other side without being asked. I was damned if I was going to go on standing like a naughty schoolboy.

Ratfink had hardly changed. His hair was still blond, and there were very few fresh lines on his face and neck. He was wearing a Viyella check shirt, his Oxford college tie, and what looked like a cashmere sweater over well-cut tweed trousers and brogues. He carried himself well, and the voice was as confident as ever.

"So you've kept up with my . . ." I began.

"Your regress," he put in sharply, at my brief hesitation. "Yes. There's a Gorelake boy in a senior position at Scotland Yard. He keeps an eye on your . . . your comings and goings for me on their computer. In case you do something unspeakably foul which would get the school into the national media. So far your miserable criminal career hasn't promoted you out of the local papers. Can't think why not. You've been a total blaggard and a failure, of course." He cleared his throat and leaned forward suddenly as if he was going to spit at me.

I jerked back involuntarily, which seemed to amuse him. "I'd decided to go straight, since serving my last sentence," I insisted. "Except I've been done out of a substantial inheritance by a swindler."

He nodded. "The money from your father's estate?"

"Yes. You knew about that, too?" I was frankly taken aback at how much intelligence he'd gathered on me.

"Not about the swindle. The . . . alleged swindle." He was star-

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ing me straight in the eyes as he continued. "There was something in the paper about your father's death. As I recall, you were his only child."

"I wasn't lying about what's happened to the money," I went on, then gave him the story in detail.

"A fool is still a fool, whether it's with money he's come upon honestly or otherwise," he responded loftily. "I told you years ago you didn't have the brain power even to be a passably efficient crook. Clearly your dimness was apparent to Mr. Elliott-Smythe."

"That wasn't his real name," I put in hastily, before regretting it.

His eyebrows lifted. "Well, I never. So you twigged that, did you? How brilliant, but too late, of course. And now you've come to me for help, because you've exhausted every other avenue. Not that there could have been many other avenues on offer."

"I want your advice," I answered, and pretty tight-lipped about it.

He gazed at me with feigned astonishment. "But I gave you that nearly twenty years ago. Go straight, I said. Go straight in your own interests, because you're not bright enough to go crooked. Well, all you're likely to get from me is a cup of tea and a digestive biscuit, and that's only because it's still raining outside. Come into the kitchen."

He got up and moved off through the door, obviously revelling in my plight. I followed, getting angrier by the second. What right had the self-satisfied swine to treat me this way? To make me feel like dirt? It wasn't Christian of him, for a start, but I'd always reckoned he was a hypocrite. I thought I knew him well enough to realise he truly wasn't going to help me either. The tea was just to string out the mental torture a bit longer.

It was as he was filling the kettle that I decided what to do. I'd never attempted anything violent before, but I was bound to get away with it, and it would solve my problems.

No one knew I was there. If I killed him, I'd have plenty of time to sift through the contents of the house and fill one of his suitcases with whatever was valuable and small enough to shift. There'd be money as well. I even knew where he'd always kept it, from the last time I'd rifled his desk. I could be in France, with the loot sold, before the body was even found. The candlesticks alone would make up for the money I'd lost. And I knew someone who'd fence the Landseer for me, though that would take longer.

There was a big old-fashioned cast-iron frying pan hanging on the wall with other utensils. He had his back to me when he moved to the gas cooker with the kettle. That's when I grabbed the pan, raised it above my head, and brought it down with all the force and hate I had in me.

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"Glad you're conscious again, Chivers," said Ratfink in that smug tone of his. "Try to stay that way this time, will you?"

I could just make him out, sitting a few feet away from me, but my vision was very blurred. I was lying nearly flat on my back. There were wires and tubes sprouting from me. My left arm was in a plaster cast which was supported in some way. My head was bandaged, too. As my free hand went to touch my brow, the pain was excruciating. "Where . . . where am I?" I asked.

"In hospital. Not in a prison cell where you deserve to be, you stupid idiot," he answered, quite amiably for him, but quietly.

Every painful blink was getting him more in focus. He leaned closer to me, as though he didn't want us to be overheard, although there was no chance of that. I was in the only occupied bed in a small observation ward where patients were put after being moved out of intensive care. "What happ—" I began.

"What happened was, you tried to do me in," he answered contemptuously. "Only you bungled it. I saw you coming. You were reflected in the glass panel on the cooker, bringing a pan down on me with a sledgehammer blow. I moved out of the way smartly, so you missed me, broke your arm on the cooker, then slipped on some grease attached to your shoe, and which, I may tell you, wasn't picked up from my immaculately clean floor. You fractured your thin skull, again on the cooker. You've been in a coma for three days. Came out of it this morning. That's why they sent for me."

"You've told the police?"

He gave a long sniff. "No. Decided against that."

"For the sake of the school?"

"Only partly." He paused. "Been expecting you for some time. When you concluded you weren't up to standard for a life of crime. I was testing the depth of your resolve when I insulted you with tea, biscuits, and no sympathy. I needed you as a supplicant before you'd avail yourself of your . . . your last opportunity."

"Which . . . which was you?" I offered.

"Yes. Sensible thinking on your part, at last." He nodded. "Logically, you'd have to end up with me. And that's a less immodest statement than . . . than a selfish one on my part. You see, retirement's not been fulfilling enough. I've been looking for something extra. Something challenging."

"Like reforming a lost soul?" I couldn't decide whether to be glad or terrified.

He cleared his throat. "There was once latent good in you, Chivers. With effort, we may be able to revive it."

"What if I try to murder you again?" I asked weakly.

"You won't. Even the first time was entirely out of character. In an educated person, murder needs guts of a specially undesirable

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kind. You don't have it. I could take the precaution of making you sign a statement, confessing to what you . . . you tried to do to me, then lodging it with my bank in case, as you say, you should be prompted to try again. Instead of that, I'm going to trust you." He paused. "Just as you are going to trust me. Years ago, I got it wrong over that pneumonia of yours which you'd been bearing like a man. I never wanted to admit as much, and I did offer you atonement later, not least by taking you into my house. But you spurned that by stealing from me. I should have put your lapses down to feeble immaturity. I didn't, and more's the pity." He frowned.

There was silence for a bit. "So what happens next?" I asked.

"I propose you come to live at my place for a bit. There's a spare bedroom. After you've recuperated, there's a priest friend of mine in the town, Father Gerard. He specialises in placing chaps of your sort. He'll find useful employment for you."

Working for the Brighton Parks Department was more interesting than I expected. Then, after two years, Ratfink and Father Gerard found me a job helping to run a small garden centre just outside the town. That was shortly after I'd married a local girl. Ratfink died a year later. He left me enough money in his will to buy a controlling interest in the business. It's a good, healthy, outdoors life I lead. From time to time, I take on youngsters Father Gerard sends me—offenders on probation. I teach them the trade and point them toward an honest life. I've just straightened one of them out. He was growing a narrow patch of cannabis in one of our heated greenhouses. It was at the back, under a long seedling table where nobody would have noticed—except me, because I'm regularly on the lookout for such things. There was enough pot there to quadruple his week's wages if he sold it.

"Give us a break, guv?" he begged me, after I'd read him the riot act. "It's my first lapse."

"So long as you'll accept you're a rotten crook," I said.

Then I told him my life story. It usually works. ●

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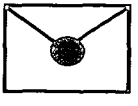

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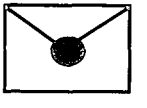

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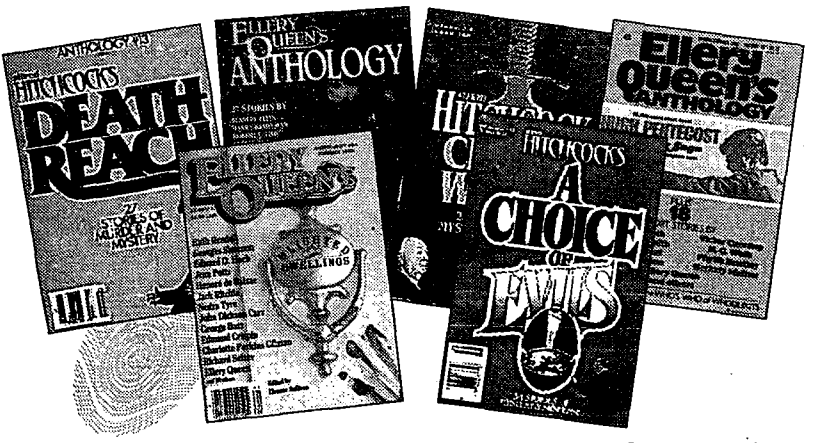

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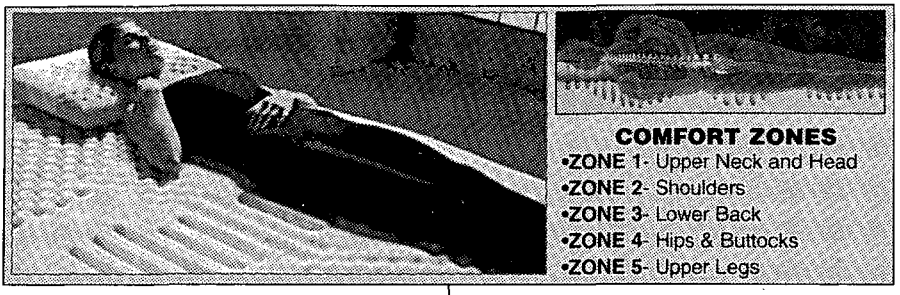

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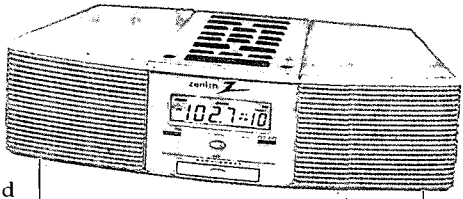

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